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"7" OF DISMAL SWAMP. A STORY OF THE GREAT SOUTH.

By GUS WILLIAMS.



The mysterious man did not offer to remove the lion head from his shoulders, but folded his arms and surveyed the boy in silence for some moments.

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"7" OF DISMAL SWAMP.

A STORY OF THE GREAT SOUTH.

By GUS WILLIAMS.

CHAPTER I.

LOST IN THE DISMAL SWAMP.

THE white, radiant light of the moon pierced the somber, drooping arms of the trees, and glittered upon the placid bosom of Lake Drummond in the great dismal swamp, as a youth guided a frail canoe across it towards the shadow of a clump of dark Virginian pines that towered up like gaunt, blasted natural sentinels upon the opposite bank.

A horrible, unearthly desolation seemed to hold the God-forsaken spot within its foul embrace, and upon the ghostly stillness ever and anon there broke the coid, chilling hoot of a night bird, mingled with that never-ceasing, horror-pregnant sound of dropping water.

Drip—drop—drip—drop! hour in and hour out, as though the very trees themselves were weeping over the loneliness and the gloom! while the dead leaves lay sodden on the treacherous earth, mingled with its rank excrecence, and the fungi bulged up from its bed as though, foul as it was in itself, it yet could not mingle with the slime and filth below.

Here and there through the swamp could be seen little stagnant pools crested with green matter that filled the air with horrible stench, and here and there dirty streams rippled onward with a dull, monotonous gurgle, bubbling upward from the slime and filth, running onward for a few yards and then sinking into the quagmire again.

The bats fluttered in and out among the net work of boughs, and strange, long-necked birds with flaming eyes beat the curled leaves with their mighty pinions.

Stouter hearts than the one which beat in Arthur Clinton's breast might have quailed at the prospect of a midnight visit to this ungodly place—the home of unholy legend and unnatural truth—but the young man seemed to be dead to the horrors around him, and guided his canoe in and out among the little islands, trusting to the lantern in its prow to lead him aright, and straight on to the blasted pines.

His face was white and joyless, and a single glance was enough to prove that he was troubled.

His actions were mechanical; his mind, burdened as it was with a dead weight of hatred, busied itself with other things of more import than the mere canoe, although that was, in a measure, a connecting link between what he dreamed and what he meant to accomplish.

He passed skillfully through the knots of verdure that broke the surface of the lake, and shot into the shadow of the pines.

Laying aside the paddle, he knotted the canoe to a low-bending branch of one of the trees, and stepped out upon a hard, solid bit of ground at the foot of the pines.

Here began the greater difficulty, for but a single narrow path, known to but few persons, wound on into the very heart of the swamp.

The greatest caution was necessary in following this path, since a single misstep, half a yard too much to the right, or a foot too much to the left, would precipitate the unfortunate pedestrian into the treacherous quagmire, whence, in the darkness, and the silence, and the solitude of the night, he would be sucked down to a hideous and loathsome death in the fathomless depths beneath.

Arthur Clinton knew this, and putting out his foot, he tested the solidity of the earth around him, and having found the narrow path, uttered an exclamation of delight.

"I am safe," he muttered. "Surely the aid of Heaven is with me in the fulfillment of my resolve, else how should I at once discover this hidden pathway, guided only by the incoherent utterances of a dying man?"

He rent a branch from one of the trees, stripped off its leaves, and cautiously began to feel his way along the narrow pathway.

Momentarily the danger grew greater, for at times the moon was hidden by the trees overhead, and he was aided only by the light of his lantern; and again he came to spots where the dead leaves were strewn in an unbroken level across marsh and path alike.

But the stick proved of the greatest value to him, since it enabled him to cast aside the leaves and test the solidity of the pathway, which, far from proceeding straight into the heart of the swamp, wound on in a serpentine course that baffled and perplexed him.

Thrice a serpent wriggled across his path; the last, a greenish reptile about a yard in length, lifting its head angrily and darting its flame-like fangs at him, and startled by the new horrors that crowded in upon him, he more than once stumbled, and was in danger of falling into the quagmire.

The bats flew around the lantern, dashing their wings against the glass, and a vulture, startled from its rest by his intrusion, fled on into the depths of the swamp, making night hideous with its frightful cries.

Once the boy paused, irresolute, and set the lantern down upon the path.

He was frightened.

"Shall I press on into the depths of this horrible place?" he muttered. "Who knows but I may lose myself and starve to death here? Who knows if Jean Mascarel's dying words be true? They may have been only the wandering fancies of an aged man in the last stages of dissolution, and the '7' but so many creatures of his imagination. No, no! I will go no further."

He had plucked the lantern from the ground and turned to retrace his footsteps.

Suddenly his face grew white, his lips compressed tightly, he wheeled around and went on into the swamp.

"Why should I go back?" he muttered.

"If all is false and I die here it will be an easier fate than the one I should court by returning to Larchmere. No, no! I can't go back there, and I won't! Come what may, I shall press on to Ghosts' Circle, if such a place exists."

Evidently this sudden determination not

to go back endowed him with new courage, for he beat the bats off with his stick, and pressed steadfastly onward.

At each step the trees and grasses grew denser, a cloud had swept before the face of the moon, and all was dark and dismal.

He scarcely dared to move to the right or to the left.

He fastened the lantern upon the end of the stick and held it above his head, feeling the way with his foot, pushing away the leaves before him, and moving along step by step in the dense darkness.

Suddenly a bat in mid air wheeled, and attracted by the lantern, dashed at it, smashed the glass and extinguishing the light.

The rapidity with which this was done startled Arthur.

He staggered back with a gasp of terror and, feeling his foot sinking beneath him, uttered a long shriek and grasped the overhanging branch of a tree.

It saved him from a frightful death; but the lantern, having fallen into the quagmire, was quickly swallowed up, the slimy earth closing over it with a sound like that of escaping gas.

Still clutching the branch of the tree, Arthur remained motionless, not daring to move either right or left, lest in the darkness he forfeit life as a penalty of his rashness.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "What now will become of me? Alone at midnight in this horrible place. Powers of mercy protect me, for I am now in the grasp of all the evil things that may people this earthly hell."

He had determined to remain standing where he was and await the coming of the day, but suddenly he felt something twining around his legs, and stooping down dashed it off.

It was a snake; it fell to the ground with a shrill hiss, and darted off into the swamp.

He realized the fact that to stand there longer was hazardous, and grasping the slimy trunk of the tree to which he clung, he clambered up into it.

The branches above formed a sort of crotch; and as he drew himself up into this, he heard a sharp hiss, a burning, stinging sensation shot through the fleshy part of his left hand just below the little finger, and something dropped with a light splash into the swamp below.

He had been bitten by a snake!

He knew it at once, and realized that some desperate measures must be resorted to before the poison coursed through his blood and became instilled into his system.

Seizing the spot between his teeth, he bit the flesh away, regardless of the excruciating agony, and sucked out the poison, spitting away the infected saliva.

Having done this for fully fifteen minutes, he bound up the wound with his handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood.

Speechless with horror, he leaned back among the branches and pondered over the situation.

In vain he strove to tell from what direc-

tion he had entered the place—the darkness and the rapid succession of distressing events had completely upset his reckoning.

Having entered the place by night, daylight would not enable him to recall landmarks.

He was lost, and of all horrible places in the wide, wide world, lost in the Dismal Swamp!

His heart sank within him; his brain whirled, and he was half tempted to fling himself into the foul swamp below.

He could no longer see the bats flitting through the air; an illimitable horror seemed to have fallen down over the uncanny place. The silence, broken only by the monotony of the dripping water, was deadly and oppressing.

Suddenly, far off, it seemed, in the very heart of the swamp, there burst upon the air the deep, sonorous toll of a bell.

He sat bolt upright and listened to it.

Every drop of blood in his veins seemed turned to ice; he felt cold fingers passing up his back and through his hair.

"Am I awake?" he asked himself, "or is this but a horrible nightmare?"

But there came no reply to his question, while still the fearful echo of that bell tolled through the silence and the gloom.

He had heard the Dismal Swamp called haunted—were he less sensible, he might have been tempted to believe it then.

At irregular intervals the bell stopped; but always at some figure divisible by the number "7." Once it was fourteen, again twenty-one, twenty-eight, thirty-five, forty-two, and ceasing on the peal forty-nine, and resuming not again.

Arthur remained motionless as one stricken dead until the last echo had died away.

"Does the mysterious '7' exist after all?" he gasped. "That bell, always within the radius of seven, and only ceasing when it was itself—forty-nine—seven times seven! Heaven, what mystery is here?"

Scarcely had the words passed his lips, ere there arose a piercing shriek, and then numerous voices began chanting, in a low tone:

"Mist hath fallen from the moon,
Uhui—uhui!
Blood the spider's web hath dyed,
Uhui—uhui!
Ere to-morrow reaches noon,
Uhui—uhui!
Perish those who have defied,
Uhui—uhui!
Ere descends to-morrow's sun,
Deeds of darknes must be done,
Uhui—uhui—uhui!"

The last word ended with a horrible burst of laughter, a bright and vivid light pierced the gloom, and rushing up from the lake far—far on into the depths of the swamp, came a pure white steed, bearing upon its back a man clad in black, with the head of a lion, the wings of a bat, and bearing in each upraised hand a flaming torch, that lit up the dangerous path the horse seemed to know so well, and bringing out in bold relief the white numeral that was imprinted upon his breast—"7."

CHAPTER II.

THE SWAMP ANGELS IN GHOST'S CIRCLE.

ARTHUR CLINTON clung to the boughs of the old trees, and followed the strange horseman with his eyes.

At first he was forced to believe it some phantasma of his overwrought imagination, but the dull, muffled trample of the horse's hoofs on the solid pathway, still echoing upon the air, proved to him it was indeed a stern reality.

"Jean Mascarel did not lie!" he mused. "The '7'—the Swamp Angels of Ghost's Circle—do exist. This figure that wore upon its bosom that mystic number—can he be the leader? I must learn. Come what will, I shall press on into the swamp. Better a grave beneath its filth and lime than the fate which awaits me at Larchmere."

He slid down from the tree as he spoke and fell upon his hands and knees in the zigzag path.

Brushing away the leaves he crept on, guided in a measure by the direction which he saw the mysterious horseman take.

This was no child's play, this creeping on into the heart of the great Dismal Swamp, but Arthur was brave, and determined to accomplish his end at all hazards.

He could only die, but to return was worse—why it was so a future chapter will reveal.

The light of the strange rider's torches still dimly flickered in the air, guiding the brave boy to the spot he sought, but suddenly these were extinguished, and a deep and impenetrable gloom descended over the frightful place.

A loud cheer echoed upon the air, and once more the mysterious voices began to chant:

"Through hill and dale, through glen and mire,
Through dew and cloud, through storm and night,
Through earth and water, air and fire,
Unhurt, we spirits wing our flight.
Joho! waugh—waugh—waugh!"

"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"
"Waugh!"

Seven distinct voices repeated the strange cry, and then was all silence again.

Still, in the darkness, Arthur crept on, determined to find these strange singers.

Suddenly he stumbled upon a fallen tree that lay in his path, and fell over so that the greater part of his body dangled into a foaming torrent, that rushed madly on into the heart of the swamp.

His fingers had closed around the fallen tree, but the slimy wood offered him no hold.

He slipped back, fell into the boiling stream, and uttering a fearful shriek, was whirled hurriedly away.

In vain he screamed for help, in vain he struggled to swim to the opposite shore; the remorseless stream bore him rapidly onward, and, finding all his efforts were unavailing, he allowed himself to drift on, trusting to Providence to bear him to safety.

"Heaven helps those who help themselves," ran an old saw. Arthur found it truthful, for in drifting by an overhanging tree, he seized the branches that dipped into the water and drew himself out.

Fortunately the tree grew best in the narrow path, and sliding down into this, Arthur, wet as he was, began again his perilous journey into the heart of the swamp.

In a measure, the fall into the torrent had done him good service, for it had carried him over a distance of over three miles, which, creeping slowly on as he had been, he would not have covered before daylight.

He was thinking of this, and thanking Heaven for it, when, upon suddenly turning a sharp curve in the path, he was surprised to discern a bright light some few yards in advance of him.

"I have tracked the mysterious man-lion to his lair," he muttered. "A few minutes and I shall know the worst."

Cautiously creeping along on all fours, he was overjoyed to find the path increased in width, until it reached a sort of platform fringed with tall rank bushes.

He could see dark figures moving around in the light, and creeping into the shadow of the bushes, peered into the open space, which he knew now to be—Ghost's Circle.

All around it was barren, save these few shrubs that served as a wall, and as Arthur parted these and looked into the strange place, the sight that met his gaze almost froze his blood.

The horse had disappeared. In the center of the circle stood "7," mounted on a rock, at whose foot knelt the body of a man with clasped hands, while his bloodshot eyes peered up into the lion face of the Swamp Angel.

Upon each side stood three men, clad like the leader, but with wolf heads, each bearing in his upraised hand a flaming torch, and upon his breast a white numeral, ranging from one up to six.

The Swamp Angels were holding court.

"7" bore in his hand an open book, from which he was reading to the man at his feet. Arthur held his breath in horror.

What was about to happen?

He could only wait for a reply.

The sickly light of the torches glimmered over the ghastly spectacle, and such a drama enacted upon such a stage was indeed horrible.

"Mercy! mercy!" gasped the doomed wretch, locking and unlocking his hands in terror.

"Silence!" commanded "7," speaking in a deep, guttural tone that lent him additional terrors. "How dare you beg for mercy here?"

Know you not that he who enters Ghost's Circle in the power of the Swamp Angels must expect only justice? You are as dead to the world as though your festering carcass lay yonder in the mire for the carrion birds to feed upon. Go on; answer my questions, and answer them truthfully, for lies I detect at once and pay with additional torments."

He bent his head and resumed his reading.

"Did you not in December last defraud the widow of Henri Lapierre, of New Orleans, of her heritage—eleven thousand dollars?"

"But I was in need. I meant to repay her and—"

"Answer me!" thundered "7." "Is this not so?"

"Ye—s!" faltered the man, who was a wealthy banker from Richmond.

"7" nodded his lion head approvingly.

"Good!" he replied. "You say you meant to repay this poor woman. Did you not in the March following drive her from your door with curses, and address her in these words:

"Begone, you hag! You shall trouble me no more! I have no money of yours!"

He waited for a reply.

The banker was silent.

"Answer me!" demanded "7." "Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Good! Now, then, did you not fraudulently go into bankruptcy at New Orleans eight years ago, whereby three poor persons were robbed of their all—Margaret Wolferth of two thousand dollars, John Winchester of one thousand, and one Ellen Dawson, a blind woman, of a paltry three hundred and fifty dollars?"

"Yes," faltered the banker, quite as much from surprise as from fear.

"7" closed the book with a sharp snap and cast it aside.

"Your name is Walter R. Seamon, is it not?"

"Yes."

"How much are you worth?"

The man hesitated; "7" repeated his question.

"Three hundred thousand dollars."

"You have a wife and daughter, neither of whom you love. Very well; they shall have enough. Now, you will write checks payable to the persons you have robbed for the amount stolen, at seven per cent. interest."

He turned aside and called out:

"1!"

No. "1" put down his torch, knowing well what was needed of him, and bringing forward a book of blank checks and an ink horn, presented them to Seamon.

The wretched man grasped the pen in his nerveless fingers, and wrote at "7's" direction checks for the amount due to each person.

When they were done "7" took them, read them carefully, and passed them to "5."

"At daybreak to-morrow," he said, "you will see that these are on their way to the people designated."

"Yes, master," responded "5," bowing and passing back to his place.

Seamon now struggled to his feet, white as ashes.

"You have done," he said. "Now take me back to the place from whence I was abducted."

"7" laughed in his face.

"Fool!" he cried. "Hear the motto of the Swamp Angels!"

Then, in a low voice, each man repeated:

"WHO ENTERS GHOST'S CIRCLE,
LEAVES HOPE BEHIND!"

CHAPTER III.

THE ASSASSIN'S DOOM.

As those words pealed slowly from the wolf mouths of the mysterious band, W' Seamon reeled back with a shriek.

"Monsters!" he cried. "You would not slay me?"

"7" tossed his lion mane and laughed mockingly.

"No," he said, "we would keep our vows—wash out blood with blood, and guard the oppressed! Think you your past is unknown to us? What first started you in the world? Shall I tell you? Murder! You slew your dearest friend in order that you might obtain his wealth; you are in secret connected with the 'Vampires,' a band of lawless men. Swamp Angels, what shall be the assassin's doom?"

Six fingers pointed at the cowering wretch, and six ghostly voices answered :

"Death!"

"Mercy—mercy!" shrieked the man, but the next instant his arms were pinioned, a gag forced in his mouth, and the strange band gathering around him, began to chant : "Haste—haste, nor lose the favoring hour, Our victim now is in our power; Hell's darkening chains at length have found him,

Soon his soul repenting will strive to fly; But struggling in vain, When we link the chain, Nought can break the fetters 'round him— Revenge! our triumph's nigh!"

"To the swamp—to the swamp!" commanded "7," as soon as the ghostly chorus was ended.

A loud shout greeted these words, a noosed rope was fastened around the neck of the doomed man, and despite all his struggles he was drawn to the edge of the circle, where a tree extended far out over the treacherous bog.

In vain did he strive to kick them off. Nemesis had overtaken him. He was doomed!

The rope was fastened to the overhanging branch of the tree; then the wretched man was pushed out into the swamp, there to sink slowly in an upright position, while his eyes drank in all the horrors around him.

Slowly—slowly the slack rope began to draw, slowly his body began its descent into the slime and filth.

White as death, Arthur watched the justice dealt out by this mysterious band.

He could dimly see the agonized face of the wretch in the fatal quagmire, and pushing aside the bushes, bent eagerly forward to get a nearer view.

The branch upon which he was leaning snapped with a loud noise, and he was thrown headlong into Ghost's Circle.

Startled by the noise, the whole band turned and saw him as he scrambled to his feet.

"Betrayed!" they shrieked, rushing upon the youth. "Death to the spy!"

Then, before he could open his lips, they threw themselves upon him, fastened a noose about his neck, and cast him into the fatal swamp, where he began sinking rapidly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHADOW OF LARCHMERE GRANGE.

ALL things in life must have an origin; and that the reader may better understand the motive of Arthur Clinton's midnight visit to the Great Dismal Swamp, we must go back to the origin of it—that terrible feud twenty years ago, which cast for all time a deep and threatening shadow over Larchmere Grange.

Reginald Clinton was of a decidedly romantic turn of mind, and two marriages failed to soften it down. His wooing was romantic; his wedding—all! He was one of the richest planters in the whole South, and with all his oddities was dearly loved by each and every one of his slaves as a just and kind master.

Yet, even among these poor blacks, his romantic nature would assert itself. On one occasion he had a slave, whose name was Peter Johnston, taken to the church and rechristened Claud Randeaux. His slave list abounded in Lara's, Mauds, Ariadnes, Noels, Ruperts and Marmadukes.

He devoured novels as a child devours candy, and even in the selection of a name for the magnificent estate willed him by his father, proved how romantic he was by calling it Larchmere Grange.

His first marriage had been an exceedingly happy one, and up to the time his wife was taken sick and died, leaving him with one child, a boy of nine years, to mourn her loss, he knew not what grief meant.

But even in his bereavement he became more romantic. His wife was buried in a white velvet casket, and retiring to the upper part of the house, he locked himself in, determined to starve himself to death, as the most romantic way, under the circumstances, of joining his dearly beloved in the spirit world.

But it is a soldier that boasts of his bravery and begs for a battle who is the first to fly when under fire, and so, in exactly seven hours, Reginald Clinton rang the bell and ordered a hearty meal.

He had truly loved his wife and was deeply grieved at her loss, but it was his romantic way of showing it that led people to believe that he was assuming a grief he did not feel;

and when he, in five years after, married a beautiful widow with one son, they only marveled that he had waited so long.

This second marriage was neither fruitful nor happy, for the two young men could not agree on the slightest point. Howard Clinton was all nobility, all openness and candor; Digby Estmere, the widow's son, was deep, crafty and treacherous, so that two souls so vastly opposite could not by any chance mingle and be happy.

Mrs. Estmere had been poor before her wedding with Reginald Grange, but once she was mistress of Larchmere Grange, she almost compelled her foolish husband to settle a large sum of money upon her. It was known, however, that Howard was to be his heir, and that should he die before reaching his majority, his step-mother would be enriched by the inheritance of Larchmere.

Some six months after making this will Reginald Clinton was thrown from his horse and brought home speechless and dying.

Apparently something weighed upon his mind, but being so long used to his romantic eccentricities people imagined it to be something of this sort, and so he died with the words unuttered.

Howard was frantic with grief, and now, more than ever, kept aloof from Digby Estmere. He found companions with but two persons—Jean Mascarel, a Frenchman whose duty it had been to overlook his late father's property, and Diana Mascarel, his daughter.

This friendship for the latter soon ripened into mutual love, and great was Mrs. Clinton's rage thereat; for, although Howard was but eighteen years of age and might still die before reaching his majority, to wed and give an heir to his possessions would remove them forever from her grasp.

Between Howard and Jean a strange thought had risen. What if Reginald Clinton had been foully dealt with?

"I believe on my soul, Howard," said Jean, one day when they were talking over the matter. "I believe on my soul that Mrs. Estmere's dainty fingers were somehow dipped into the pie. Just how, I can never say, but I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she or her villainous son had been long trying to put him out of the way, and he only realized it when it was too late to speak. Besides, just see how thick she has grown with that lawyer, Crabber Grab; you know your father was leaving to visit him when he was killed. Whether he did visit him or not, must forever remain a mystery. Grab says not; but I think yes."

"And I do also, Jean," replied Howard. "Despite Crabber Grab's denial, I feel certain that my father visited him on that fatal day. He says the last time he saw my father was two weeks previous to his death, when he assisted him to make another will which totally disinherited me. But no such will has been found to exist, and why it should I cannot see. My father never quarreled with me, and led me to believe that I should always be his heir. Grab thinks the will was either hidden or destroyed, but I do not believe it ever existed. I know full well that my father was of a highly romantic turn of mind, but I cannot bring myself to the belief that he would will you your building and land in the midst of Larchmere, will me almost all else, and conceal another document which would suddenly overthrow us all. Bah! it is ridiculous. As well tell me you could penetrate to the heart of the Dismal Swamp yonder with no knowledge of the secret winding path amid the treacherous death-pit and the bog."

He linked his arm in Mascarel's, and the two walked away from the spot where they had been standing. Scarcely had they left, ere the bushes parted gently, and Digby Estmere glided into the path, and shook his clenched fist after them.

"Go on—go on, my gallants!" he fairly hissed, his face contorted by passion; "there's a day for all, and when mine comes, you shall dance to a lively tune, I'll warrant ye."

And having delivered himself of this very loving remark, Mr. Digby Estmere turned and went into the house.

On the following morning Howard announced his intention to marry Diana Mascarel, and on the same afternoon Mrs. Clinton dispatched a messenger with a letter to Crabber Grab.

Toward dusk he reached Larchmere and was shown at once to Mrs. Clinton's room, where the amiable widow and worthy son sat awaiting him.

Crabber Grab bowed lowly upon entering the room, and Mrs. Clinton motioned him to a chair.

"Well, you sent for me?" he said, speaking with a leer that was habitual with him.

"Yes," replied his hostess. "Grab, Howard Clinton is going to marry."

Crabber Grab drew a long breath.

"By Jove! that's awkward for us."

"Awkward? I should say it was."

She paused for a moment, looked him straight in the eye, and added in a low, intense tone:

"Crabber Grab, every stone in this place shall be turned, but you must find that missing will."

Grab returned her gaze, leered more horribly than before, and replied simply:

"All right!"

Few as the words were, they satisfied the widow, and she joined cordially in the wedding festivities which took place the next week; and all might have gone well had not Digby Estmere's head become inflamed with wine, and thus made to feel a courage he did not possess, he openly insulted Howard Clinton before all his guests.

Young Clinton gave him no time to apologize, but disengaging himself from the arm of his bride, he planted a stinging right-hander between Digby's eyes with such force that he was bowled bodily through an adjacent window, from whence he fell to the ground.

Fortunately the fall was light, and beyond his feelings, Digby Estmere was not hurt.

He arose in the dust, and shook his clenched fist up at the broken window.

"I will kill you, Howard Clinton!" he hissed, "even though I swing for it!"

But Howard laughed alike at him and his threats, and until a year had passed knew not what grief meant; but then, when he should have been the merriest, the dark cloud came, for with the birth of an heir to Larchmere Grange the mother's spirit fled. It was the morning of life and the evening of death.

To say that Howard was beside himself with grief was to picture it lightly; but he had yet to learn that trouble never comes alone, for three weeks after, when, by order of Mrs. Clinton, the chimney grace in his father's library was repaired, the missing will was discovered hidden under the hearthstone.

He was now a pauper, for all descended to Mrs. Clinton. Yet, by a faulty clause, Jean Mascarel was allowed to keep his cottage in the midst of the grounds, and here he took Howard and his child.

Now that he was penniless, Digby Estmere lost no opportunity of heaping indignities upon him, until Howard, unable to stand it any longer, forced his way to Mrs. Clinton's presence.

"Murderess!" he foamed, "you and your villainous cub slew my father. You have forged this last will. Beware! I am going now to Crabber Grab, and I'll choke the lie from him."

He rushed wildly from the room, and the moment he was gone Mrs. Clinton rang the bell and summoned her son to her presence.

In fifteen minutes he left the room white as death, harnessed his horse, leaped into the saddle and galloped at all speed from the gates of Larchmere.

At dusk he returned, but Howard Clinton came no more to Larchmere.

A week after a naked body, decayed past recognition, was found in a pool by the roadside, and further on one of Howard Clinton's shoes.

It was supposed that the unfortunate fellow had stopped to take a swim and been drowned, and his clothes, found by some slave, taken away, and so the affair died out and was forgotten.

Shortly after Digby Estmere married, and his wife bore him one son, who inherited all his father's evil nature, while Arthur Clinton, Howard's son, was but his father over again.

When Arthur was about ten years of age a stranger paid Jean Mascarel a visit, and remained closeted with him for some time. As they knew but few people, Arthur was surprised at this visit, but much more so when he beheld the stranger pass directly into the Dismal Swamp, which everybody said was haunted.

Years passed on, but the stranger came no more.

As the time swept by, a feud like that which had existed between their fathers now arose between Arthur Clinton and Donald Estmere.

But Arthur had always Jean Mascarel to depend upon, yet there came a day when it was no more.

Poor old Jean sickened and died, but before expiring he called the boy to him, explained the strange footpath through the swamp, and bade him, when in need, penetrate its depths, where he would find the Swamp Angels, who should look over him.

Death claimed its prey, and scarcely had the good old man been laid in the ground, ere Digby Estmere informed Arthur that he must find another home, since the gates of Larchmere were closed to him forever.

Arthur, at nineteen, inherited all the physical strength of his father, and being taught the views of Jean Mascarel, refused to go.

Digby Estmere stormed furiously.

"Pauper!" he cried, "how dare you dispute my will? Begone! or I will have my slaves drive you hence."

Arthur turned upon him like a tiger.

"Your slaves?" he repeated, with stinging sarcasm. "How came they yours? By murder—murder most foul and unnatural. How—"

Before he could complete the sentence, Digby Estmere felled him to the earth.

Strong as he yet was, Arthur was no match for the brute power of Estmere—he knew that, and leaping from the ground, seized a heavy stick, and beat the man so violently that he fell at his feet a senseless man.

Once his anger had spent itself, he realized what he had done. He had placed himself in the grasp of the law, and flinging aside the stick, he fled at all speed, hiding until midnight in a clump of trees some half a mile down the road.

When all was dark and still, he left his cover, glided to the edge of the lake, where his own canoe was moored, and rowed across to the mysterious path in the heart of the Dismal Swamp. What followed the reader already knows.

CHAPTER V.

THE GATE OF ALLEGIANCE—TREACHERY.

THE moment Arthur Clinton felt the ground sinking from beneath him, he uttered a loud shriek of horror.

Half an hour before he had meditated throwing himself into the great swamp, but now that he knew death was so near at hand he did not relish it so well.

Flinging up his hands, he grasped the rope so that it could not tighten around his throat, and shrieked at the top of his voice:

"Mercy—mercy! Save me if you are human!"

"Death to the spy!" cried "3," where at all the others took up the cry, waving their flaming torches around their heads as they did so.

"No—no—no!" cried Arthur. "Do not kill me. I am not a spy; I swear to you I am not! Mercy! Save me! I came to seek '7.'"

He of the lion head uttered a cry of surprise, lifted his torch higher, that he might get a better view of the boy's face, and demanded:

"Who are you? How came you here?"

"I was sent by an old Frenchman—one Jean Mascarel, late overseer at Larchmere Grange."

"Ah! And your name is—"

"Arthur Clinton."

"7" reeled back as though shot, and cried out loudly to his band:

"Quick! Haul him out. Save him, and woe to the man who harms a hair of his head!"

To the Mysterious Seven this command was more of a surprise than it was to Arthur; since the words of Jean Mascarel had led him to expect mercy at the hands of this singular man, who had set himself the task of righting the wrongs of the oppressed.

"But," ventured one of the men, "our laws are death to all spies, and—"

"Silence!" thundered "7." "Am I master here, or are you? Haul the boy out. Don't you hear what he says? He is not a spy."

He waved his hands in the direction of Arthur, and the poor lad was overjoyed to find himself drawn out of the morass and once more laid upon solid ground.

By this time Seamon, the unfortunate, yet villainous banker, had entirely disappeared, and tapping Arthur upon the shoulder, "7" bade him follow him.

The torch lit the way, and crossing directly

over ghost's circle, "7" led him to a clump of trees beyond.

A creeping vine hanging from the boughs of the trees fell like a curtain till it swept the ground, and pushing this aside, "7" led Arthur upon a solid plateau surrounded by dense foliage, and in the very center of this space the boy was overjoyed to find a log hut of rude structure.

All this while the mysterious man had not uttered one word, and fearful of incurring his displeasure, Arthur followed him into the hut in silence.

The lower floor was but one room; what the one above was like Arthur could only guess, but he saw that here no attempt was made toward luxury.

A table and a few wooden chairs comprised all that the hut contained save a rude frame upon the wall, which held a picture of a black and a white hand clasped together. The floor was neatly sanded, and in the broad, open fireplace lay a few logs ready to be burned when fire should be needed.

"7" waved the boy to a chair.

The mysterious man did not offer to remove the lion head from his shoulders, but folded his arms and surveyed the boy in silence for some moments.

"You are Arthur Clinton, son of Howard Clinton and grandson of Reginald Clinton?" he said, at length.

Arthur nodded his head in the affirmative.

"You came here for what?"

"Justice. The memory of my dead father has been desecrated, and he who holds possession of what should be mine has turned me out into the world to starve."

"Ah! You allude to Digby Estmere."

"Yes. How know you that?"

"The Swamp Angels fly by night; they read the secrets of all hearts. Digby Estmere has been a marked man for years."

"Then why is he not in your power?"

"We work slow but sure. There was a will by which Howard Clinton was defrauded of his rights. Digby Estmere must live until the truth concerning that will is made public. But of this anon. Tell me now why you have chosen to come here at this hour?"

"Because Jean Mascarel, my grandfather, told me to come at midnight. I wish to renounce all and become a Swamp Angel, a defender of the oppressed."

"You would join us? Impossible."

"Ah, sir, say not so. It is my one wish. I love the laws of liberty."

"You are noble. Listen. Between the North and the South there arises a dark cloud. It is the shadow of war, and the hour will come when black and white shall meet on equal footing. The North shall dash the chains from the wrists of the poor slaves, and the Angels of Dismal Swamp are sworn to help them. Already the slaves are revolting, while the eagle of war plumes itself for the contest. Would you become one of us? Are you prepared to uphold the stars and stripes at the cannon's mouth?"

"Yes!" responded Arthur. "Let it rain lead and hail fire, but I shall battle for the cause of right. Liberty, equality, fraternity!"

"7" sprang forward and wrung the boy's hand.

"Good! You shall be one of us!" Then raising his voice, he shouted: "Swamp Angels, upholders of the right and slavers of the oppressors, assemble."

Instantly the band answered to his cry and flock'd into the cabin.

"7" turned and faced them.

"Brothers," he said, "the oath is to be administered to yonder lad. Are you prepared to greet him as a brother?"

"Yes," replied the six voices.

"Surround him, then."

Instantly the six closed around Arthur, whom "7" lifted upon the table, each man holding his torch aloft in his left hand, and with his right leveling a loaded revolver at the gallant lad.

"7" moved to the old fire-place, and took from a receptacle in the back a human skull and a volume of the Holy Bible.

Laying the skull upon the table, he placed Arthur's foot upon it and put the Bible into his hand.

Arthur pressed the volume to his lips, and then, at the direction of "7," raised it above his head.

Immediately the band began to chant in a deep, sepulchral tone:

"Hark, hark! the trumpet sound,
Liberty proclaims around;
Let the freeman's joyous call,
See the bondman's fetters fall!
Revenge, revenge! the crushed one cries;
See the furies dark arise,
See the serpent how they roar,
Deadly hisses fill the air!
Blood shall fall soon, like the dew—
Welcome, brother, hail to you!"

Then a deep silence fell over the place, broken only by the click of the revolvers as the six men cocked them; then, in a solemn voice, "7" administered the oath, which Arthur repeated word for word as it passed his lips.

As the last word ended, there came a crack of fire-arms; twenty men leaped into the place, and with harsh shouts of triumph threw themselves upon the Swamp Angels.

They were the Vampires, the band "7" had sworn to destroy.

Crack—crack! rang forth the pistols, the torches were dashed to the earth, and in dense gloom, the two parties met.

"Treachery!" shrieked "7." "We are surrounded. Up, lads, and hack them to pieces. Liberty for the bondmen; down with the tyrant!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

MRS. ESTMERE-CLINTON sat alone in her boudoir.

A dainty little clock upon the mantel had just chimed the hour of eight, when Crabber Grab was announced.

The widow's brows knitted heavily; she turned down the light and bade the servant show the lawyer (Heaven save the mark!) into her presence.

Crabber Grab was never a welcome guest at Larchmere Grange—time had been when he was; but that was of the past now, and the widow, if she ever prayed at all, prayed that he might die speedily, for there was a chain of guilt between these two, and Mrs. Clinton would have sacrificed anything to see it shattered.

The door swung inward with a low creak, and Crabber Grab came into the room.

He bowed very humbly, leering in a frightful way, and passed his fingers through his scanty locks.

What his age might be was a greater puzzle than the one set forth by the Sphynx of mythological fame. He might have been fifty; he looked a hundred. He was wretchedly lean and tall, dressed in the shabbiest black, and cringed like a worm, even when he stung as a serpent.

"Good-evening, my dear," he whined, as he came into the room.

The widow waved him to a seat.

"What do you want?" she demanded, sharply. "You have been hunting me for the last week like a bloodhound. Speak quickly and go!"

Crabber Grab bowed lowly.

"Don't be so harsh, my dear," he whined. "Remember I am on the verge of the grave."

"Bah! You have been saying that for the last twenty years. I wish to Heaven you would hurry and fall into it!"

A poisonous glare shot from Crabber Grab's eyes, but he never changed his tone.

"How unkind you are, my dear," he cringed. "Don't be so harsh. You may be sorry for it one of these days."

The speech might have implied a threat; but Crabber Grab's unvarying tone never gave a direct meaning to his words.

Mrs. Clinton made no reply.

Grab fumbled with his hat for awhile, hemmed and hawed, and finally said:

"I suppose you know why I am here, my dear?"

"No, I don't," snapped the widow. "If I did, I'd hurry you out as fast as possible. What do you want?"

"Money."

"Preposterous! Two weeks ago I gave you five hundred dollars. You promised me to settle all demands for ten thousand—you have had now nearly twenty. I will pay no more."

"Ah, my dear, you are so heartless. Just consider. I only want one thousand dollars. You know I wouldn't make trouble, for I'm an honest, God-fearing man, but I'm sure young Clinton would give me twice that sum

for a little bit of paper signed by you, which I have put away so snug and safe."

"You dare not do this!"

"Yes, I dare, my dear, but I'm too honest."

"You would go to prison with me."

"But not to the scaffold, my dear."

Mrs. Clinton's face grew white.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Nothing, my dear, only that this paper which I took from the fire-place so many years ago has a label on it, and is marked, 'poison,' and, taking a little packet from his pocket, 'here is a bundle of letters written by Harold Devereaux to Felecia, his wife, which you forgot to lock up securely enough; and here, a diary, very old, which chronicles the life of Felecia Devereaux, murderer."

Mrs. Clinton sprang up with a shriek and made a clutch at the little packet.

"Give them to me—they are mine!" she cried. "How dare you read my letters!"

"Oh, ho!" cried Crabber Grab, "then you must be Felecia Devereaux; I thought she was only a friend of yours. I guess I get my one thousand dollars, eh?"

Mrs. Clinton sank back in her chair with a gasp.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH CRABBER GRAB LIFTS THE CURTAIN FROM MRS. CLINTON'S PAST.

FOR some moments Mrs. Clinton gazed blankly at Crabber Grab.

"How—how came those damning proofs in your power?" she gasped at length. "I thought them forever safe from every beholder—safe under lock and key in my escritoire!"

Crabber Grab smiled blandly.

"Very likely, my dear," he chuckled, "but you see now they are in my possession. Take my advice, henceforth. Never show your dislike to any human being; or, if you must, be careful not to leave them alone in your boudoir, as you did me a short time back."

"Devil! then you forced the lock and wrested them from their hiding-place?"

"Precisely, my dear."

"Thief!"

"Murderess. Don't go to calling hard names; you see I can retaliate now, my dear. Besides, it's a nasty practice; and being an honest man, I have no wish to cause ill feeling. All I desired five minutes ago was one thousand dollars; now I think of it, I want two."

"Monstrous! I will not give it."

"Then just let me read you one of these letters;" and before Mrs. Clinton could stay him, he pulled one of the letters from the packet to read it aloud.

"FELECIA—I will not listen to your plan for one single minute. I was poor when you married me, why do you now rail over our poverty? You ask me to preserve silence in regard to our marriage that you may falsely wed Robert Estmere, who has become deeply enamored of your fair face. You tell me he is worth a million and cannot possibly live more than a year. You will then possess all his wealth, and promise to rejoin me. No! the plot is infamous. I will not listen to it for one single instant. You are my wife and I will yield you to no other man for fortune's sake.

Your Husband,

"HAROLD DEVEREAUX."

Crabber Grab laid the letter down with a chuckle.

"That was a very pretty plot, my dear; now shall I tell you just what your diary informs me you did? Well, you wrote again and again to your husband, but he still remained obdurate. He would not listen to your plans, while Robert Estmere, believing you a single woman, wooed you incessantly. Well, at last, maddened by what you were pleased to term your husband's headstrong folly, you gave your promise to wed Estmere, and informed him that you must go for a few days to visit a sick relative. You were living in London then, and your husband had been sent by the firm for which he worked to overlook a branch of their business in Calais.

"You left the very next morning and joined him, telling him that you had entirely given over the plan, and thanked him for saving you from yourself."

"Overjoyed that you should listen to reason he fell an easy prey to your machinations."

"That night he took you for a sail upon the river, but nothing more was heard of either

of you by the boatman of whom the vessel had been hired.

"Two days after the boat was found keel upward, lying upon the sands a mile down the river.

"My dear, you slew him—pushed him overboard, your diary tells me, and as no one knew you were married, you were perfectly safe in returning to London to wed Robert Estmere.

"This you did within a month after the death of Devereaux, and once installed at Estmere's estate as his mistress, you fancied yourself forever safe. But, unfortunately for you, a year after the birth of your son, Dibby, Robert Estmere became deeply involved by the failure of a bank where most of his wealth was deposited; and six months after, finding himself a ruined man, he blew out his brains and left you a widow, in possession of the princely sum of exactly eleven pounds, five shillings and sixpence; so that after staining your soul with murder, you found yourself a thousand times worse off than if you had lived on peaceably with Harold Devereaux.

"This was a terrible state of affairs, and in sheer despair you took ship for America, where you, after years of toil, met Reginald Clinton, and became the mistress of Larchmere Grange.

"But, unfortunately, you hated Clinton's son, and wished to come in for all the property, which could only be done by hastening the death of hubby 'No. 3.' You were unscrupulous; you administered poison in small quantities, but with your customary bad luck Reginald Clinton discovered this, and rode at once to consult me upon business relating to it. He came to alter the will bequeathing you a third of his property and to make Howard sole heir. What he did or what he didn't do is none of your business, my dear. As soon as he had told me of his suspicions regarding you, I excused myself for a moment, retired to another room, and sent you a letter explaining all particulars.

"After being closeted with me for three hours, Reginald Clinton mounted his horse and cantered off toward Larchmere Grange.

"He reached it a dying man, having been thrown from his horse, and before he could speak one word, he fell back a corpse and left you once more a widow. Time passed, and when Howard Clinton married, a will was suddenly discovered bequeathing you every penny of your late husband's estate, and leaving his beloved son a pauper."

Crabber Grab had ceased speaking.

He glanced up to see the effects of his words upon the beautiful widow, and his eyes were glittering.

She had grown silent; her face was white as the face of the dead.

"Why don't you speak, my dear?" he whined, "Don't sit there staring so strangely, it makes one feel bad. I fancy I have hurt your feelings, and I wouldn't do that for the world."

Mrs. Clinton sprang to her feet.

"Hypocrite! fraud!" she cried, lifting her clenched hands above him. "Cease your lying cant. What are you but the refuse of villainy? What are you but the worst of rascals? But with it all you are a fool to attempt to brave me thus. Does not what you have learned of my past tell you I am a desperate woman? Idiot! we are here alone; what prevents me from striking you a corpse at my feet?"

She whipped out a tiny little revolver as she spoke, and leveled it at his head. Crabber Grab laughed lowly.

"Fire away, my dear," he chuckled; "copies of all these letters are in the hands of my wife, and if I fail to turn up before daylight they will be published, and the police put upon your track for three murders. We're playing a little game of cat and dog, my dear, but bow-wow has the best of it now. Blaze away, my pretty one, if you feel like it; only remember that the first shot seals your fate and puts a rope around that white throat of yours. Diamond necklaces are much more becoming to you than hempen ones. Why don't you shoot, my gentle dove? Are your bullets no deadlier than your threats?"

They looked each other squarely in the eyes, and for a moment neither spoke; then the widow tossed the pistol aside and opened her check-book.

"What you desire you shall have," she said, writing an order for the amount upon her banker and tossing it to him. "Now tell

me what will you take for the letters and the diary in your possession?"

Crabber Grab chuckled and rubbed his hands briskly.

"Hum, ha!" he ejaculated. "We are coming down to business. Let me see. Suppose we say fifty thousand dollars."

Singularly enough, the widow did not demur at this extortionate demand.

"You shall have it," she said. "Meet me at nine o'clock to-morrow night at Lake Drummond."

Crabber Grab had arisen to go.

"No, no, my dear," he chuckled; "too lonely. Remember the fate of the last fellow who ventured upon water with you. Make it the same hour at the Blasted Oak. I will be there. Good-night."

The door closed softly. He was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MOONLIGHT BATTLE IN THE DISMAL SWAMP.

THE moment the very first shot was fired by the Vampires Arthur had seen "7" stoop and press his finger heavily upon a little black button in the floor; then the table jarred so greatly that he was almost thrown from it, and the very next instant he realized that he was sinking rapidly.

The intense gloom which followed the extinguishing of the torches rendered it impossible to discern the faintest object, else he would have leaped from the table to save himself from being drawn down into the gulf into which he was fast sinking.

Suddenly the downward motion ceased with a sharp jerk; he heard two boards fly together rapidly above his head, closing up the aperture through which he had descended.

The noise of the conflict raged wildly above him, and he realized the fact that he was dangling 'twixt the floor above and the rapid stream below—dangling in a foul and fetid atmosphere, pregnant as it was with the noxious gasses that descended from the slimy swamp.

"7" had completely shut himself out from the dangers of the conflict.

This by no means suited Arthur.

His adventurous spirit prompted him to dare and do deeds that should put his elders to the blush, and to signalize his initiation into the band by fighting nobly in its cause.

But this was denied him, and as the cries of the two parties above met his ears, he groaned with impatience.

"Let me up—let me up!" he shrieked. "7, here me. I am no coward. Let me be up and doing."

But the noise of the conflict drowned his words, and no one offered to release him.

He made an effort to reach the floor above, but the dangling trap hung too low to admit of this.

Neither could he leap below, for the river and the swamp promised him only hideous and loathsome death in their foul embrace.

He was powerless to act, one way or the other.

He could only listen to the battle and await its issue.

Suddenly a strange and horrible thought came to him.

What if the Vampires should be triumphant?

What if all the Swamp Angels were slain?

Would he not be compelled to stay in this terrible place until a merciful death should end his sufferings?

Frightened by this thought, he knelt and prayed upon this swaying trap that Heaven might direct the triumphant issue to the Swamp Angels.

Meanwhile the fight had shifted from the hut to the plateau without, and soon the sounds became so indistinct that Arthur resolved the scene of battle had again been changed.

Nor was he mistaken, as a return to "7" and his gallant band will prove to the reader.

The shots flew like hail, but, singularly enough, the only men to bite the dust were the Vampires.

Thrice their chieftain could have sworn his bullets had struck "7" in the breast; but they seemed to do no injury, for he fought like a demon, felling his foes upon all sides of him.

Suddenly he dashed his pistol into the face of his opponent, and leaped from the door.

Darting across Ghost's Circle to a strip of

pines, he dashed in, and a moment after came forth upon his steed, and ax in hand spurred to the scene of the conflict, which had now changed from the interior of the hut to the exterior.

The Swamp Angels hailed the reappearance of their leader with acclamations of joy, and fought with renewed vigor.

Riding into the hottest of the fight, "7" whirled the gleaming battle-ax around his lion head, and fought with the fury of a demon.

"Down with the oppressors!" he shouted, urging his men on to deeds of wonderful valor. "Freedom for the crushed! Strike well, and strike for liberty! Huzza!"

The Vampires crowded closely to him, some clinging to the bridle of the horse, who reared and pawed the ground with his iron hoofs, others clutching at the sides of the brave animal, and discharged their weapons fully in the lion face and at the heart of the mysterious man.

Right and left swept the glittering battle-ax, crimsoned now with the blood of the oppressors, while still no Swamp Angel fell, although scarce one had escaped being the butt for a dozen bullets.

"7" spurred at the Vampire leader, and with one mighty stroke cleft him to the chin.

A shout of mingled joy and dismay greeted this, and seeing their leader writhing upon the moonlit ground, the Vampires threw down their arms and fled.

"Victory!" screamed "7," urging his horse after the flying men. "On to them, Angels! Huzza! Cut the oppressors to pieces! Up, Devil! on, boy! Huzza—huzza!"

It seemed as though a million echoes took up the joyful cry—as though hell itself had emptied all its horrors broadcast upon the earth, while these winged and wolfish creatures with their leader were fair representatives of "Inferno's" chosen fiends.

In the darkness and the gloom the unfortunate Vampires mistook the hidden path, and shriek after shriek rang out upon the air as the ravenous swamp gorged itself with prey.

Then there came silence, and "7" rode back to his men triumphant.

There stood the six wolf heads all unharmed, but of the Vampires, not one lived to keep the secret of their shameful defeat.

A shout of glee greeted the reappearance of "7."

He slipped from the saddle and patted the snowy neck of his horse with loving tenderness.

"Good boy, good Devil—bravo!" he whispered caressingly.

The horse seemed to understand him, gave him one of those knowing, grateful looks, no one but Rosa Bonheur can reproduce, and tossing his magnificent head, neighed proudly.

"7" paused for a moment to see the horse taken back to the stable among the pines, and then went hastily to the hut, and raising the trap, released Arthur from the obnoxious imprisonment.

By this time the lights were all blazing once more, and as he gazed at the seven men before him, Arthur could not repress an exclamation of surprise.

"You are all living!" he cried. "Among such a reckless use of fire-arms, were no men slain?"

"7" nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Yes," he said. "Twenty; but they were all Vampires. Look!"

He took the boy by the arm as he spoke, led him to the door of the hut and pointed to the silent figures lying so white and still in the moonlight.

"Horrible!" he shuddered, turning his back upon the ghastly spectacle. "Yet all the Swamp Angels live. How comes it so?"

"7" put up his hand and drew the black garment from his breast, exposing to view as he did so a suit of light armor beneath.

In a word, both heads and bodies of the mysterious seven were invulnerable.

"Ah! I understand," said Arthur. "I see now why I was lowered into the darkness beneath the hut. I possessed no suit of mail to protect me."

"7" nodded his head.

"You are right. I saw at a glance you were no coward; knew you were itching to be in the midst of the fray; but with twenty against seven, you, without armor, would be lying there now in the moonlight like one of those."

Arthur took his hand and shook it heartily.

"Thank you!" he said. "You have saved my life; for, with the impetuosity of youth, I would have thrown it away. What I thought a curse I find now a blessing."

"We often find it so in life, my boy," said "7" dropping his hand; then Arthur heard a deep sigh issue from the lion's head, as the mysterious man added in a voice tremulous with emotion: "And, vice versa, that which we oft deem a blessing, may in the end prove a bitter, scathing curse!"

It was the first show of emotion save that of bitter, unrelenting hatred toward those who oppressed the poor slaves, that Arthur had seen in the man, but now the deep, mournful intonation of his voice thrilled the lad.

"You have suffered then, too?" he said.

"7" turned with an impatient gesture.

"Suffered?" he repeated, in a tone of bitter irony. "Suffered? Ay, I have suffered. Many a man would have gone mad under the burden I have been forced to bear. Had I not suffered, I should have been unable to appreciate the full extent of the pangs of those who are under the ban of slavery. Suffered? Bah! I have been mad. Shall I then stoop like these poor, ignorant blacks, and kiss the rod which smote me? No. Better a grave in the heart of the great Dismal Swamp than tame submission to a tyrant's laws. Up, then, and battle for the right. God is with us—with the cause of the stars and stripes—and there comes a time when, as the chaff from the mill eddies in the sunlight and falls unheeded to the earth, so shall fall those who now are masters."

His words rang with the tone of prophecy, and as he spoke, in the vista of a brilliant future, Arthur Clinton saw the fetters fall from the poor black wrists where they had hung so long, and the bondman from his unjust slavery rise as God made him—a man; even though his skin be black as midnight is.

"7" had moved away, but as though struck with a sudden thought, he wheeled and came back to the boy.

"Listen!" he said, speaking with a desperate earnestness. "In seven days we shall know the worst; in seven days the South will either deliver its slaves from serfdom, or the North will proclaim war throughout the length and breadth of the land. But the first blow towards the slaves' liberty must be stricken by us. A mile from Larchmere Grange is situated the plantation of Gilder Hargreaves. He is one of the wealthiest and most tyrannical of slave dealers. In three nights a descent will be made upon his place, the slaves freed and brought here to the shelter of this swamp. We shall not be followed, for besides ourselves none save the Vampires knew the secret path, and they are now creatures of the past. In the upper rooms of the hut you may retire to rest, but before your head touches your pillow, pray that God may aid us in our undertaking. Heaven be with you, and now good-night."

"But there," ventured Arthur, pointing out to the bodies of the slain men, "surely you will need my aid in disposing of them."

"7" shook his head.

"No," he said, "they will remain where they are until mid-day to-morrow. The dawn will see them a feast for the vultures, the noon will seem them a prey for the swamp. Good-night."

"Good-night," replied Arthur, and taking the proffered torch from the hand of "5" he moved up the ladder to the rooms above.

Here there were piles of blankets spread out upon the floor, and sticking the torch in a hole in the wall, he removed his coat and shoes, rolled himself in a blanket, and flung himself upon the floor.

But for some time sleep would not visit his eyes.

The events of the past twelve hours had crowded in upon him so rapidly that he was half bewildered, and now that he was allowed time to think over them, it seemed like a dream.

At length his eyelids grew heavy—he slumbered.

But not calmly; his brain acting as a phantasmagoria, distorted his peopled dreams, and there seemed to flash before him myriads of inhuman things, not the least of which was the lion head of "7" and the wild, wolfish visages of the attendant Swamp Angels.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIGURE IN THE ROAD.

WHEN the door closed upon Crabber Gab, Mrs. Clinton sank back in her chair with a gasp.

"Lost—lost!" she moaned, covering her face with her hands. "All the dark, buried secrets of the past are resurrected, and I am more deeply in the power of this villainous hypocrite. Madness! Why was I tempted? I might have been a happy woman to-night had I resisted the voice of the tempter and kept my hands unsullied by the taint of crime. I might have been—Pshaw! what I am I have made myself. It is too late to retract now, and as I have entered upon a path from which there is no exit, it behoves me to remove every obstacle and tread it free and untrammeled to its very end!"

Her hands had fallen from her face, and now lay clenched at her sides. Her cheek had become deathly white, and a harsh, cold line wreathed her lips.

"I will triumph!" she muttered, springing to her feet and pacing wildly up and down the room. "Crabber Grab has grown to be an obstacle, and are we not told that obstacles are merely difficulties to be surmounted? He must be removed. There is no help for it, and I will do the deed myself rather than trust it to hireling hands and thrust my head still further into the noose. Oh, if I were only a man!"

As a tigress chafes beneath the bars that bind her to a weaker gaze, and keep her from the wild depths of her native jungle, so chafes she now beneath the scourge of Crabber Grab's unprincipled villainy.

The room seemed too small for her; she felt as though she must dash down the walls with her clenched fists.

"To-morrow night!" she muttered, as she paused before her writing desk, "to-morrow night!"

Her hand fell upon her paper knife—a long and slender blade of steel, fastened to a hilt of polished ivory.

She took it up and paused for a moment as though in doubt.

Her face had grown whiter still; she moved over to the table, turned up the light and thrust the blade of the paper knife into the flame, holding it there until the rounded end was at a white heat.

Without a moment's pause she snatched up a heavy pair of shears and cut the softened steel to a sharp point.

A knot of flowers rested in a silvered urn upon the table; she tossed them out, and plunged the heated steel into the water.

There was a frightful hissing as the elements of fire and water met, and the ominous sound seemed to please the widow.

She withdrew the blade and felt the keen point.

It was hard, cold and sharp.

She replaced the bouquet carefully, plunged the knife under her pillow, disrobed, put out the light and went to bed.

* * * * *

Once out in the grounds of Larchmere, Crabber Grab turned and shook his fist in the direction of the beautiful widow's room.

"Plot for plot; my aged Venus," he muttered. "You hurt my vanity by supposing I would fall so easily into the net you are weaving. Not any, my dear, not any."

He rubbed his hands briskly together and moved out of the gates of Larchmere.

"It was only yesterday Arthur Clinton was driven from these very gates," he muttered. "Play me false, Felecia, and I'll bring him back in different style."

He went on down the moonlit road, chuckling to himself as he went, all unconscious that a man had come down the path from Dismal Swamp and was following on in his footsteps—a man tall and handsome, plainly clad and with a face white and hard as marble.

A man whom one could look at and yet at once admire and fear; admire for his pale, Grecian beauty; fear for the unbending look of determination upon his face.

A glance revealed him as one who knew the hollow mockeries of human life and probed its greatest depths fearlessly.

Half a mile down the road Crabber Grab paused, took out the packet of letters and drew from among them an old daguerrotype in a shabby velvet frame.

He opened it—regarded it with a chuckle.

"A fine fellow, my dear," he mused. "A

pity you murdered him," and he went on his way rejoicing.

The stranger moved on silently in his wake, keeping in the shadow of the bushes along the road, halting when Grab halted, following when he moved again, but never once stepping out into the moonlight where he could be seen.

Still unconscious of this tracking shadow that followed in the darkness of his own, Crabber Grab went on his way.

Two miles further on he turned into a branch road, and passed on through a thicket of dark Virginian pines to an open space beyond, where a tumble down little shanty, that looked like the hut of a slave, stood in bold relief against the mellow light.

A candle blazed in an upper window; he stopped and looked at it.

"A ruinous nest!" he muttered; "but how well it is feathered. Never fear, Felecia Clinton, but I shall have a palace yet, far more beautiful than Larchmere Grange, and there shall be no blood upon my hands either, I warrant ye!"

A woman moved near the window, and stood where the light of the candle streamed across her face.

She was tall and thin; her withered skin was yellow as the flame before her, and her coarse red hair fell in tangled masses over her brow.

It was Becky Grab, the lawyer's wife.

"Ah, my jewel!" he muttered, rubbing his hands briskly. "We shall live in luxury yet!"

A footstep pressed the fallen leaves, a hand fell heavily upon the lawyer's shoulder; he turned with a gasp, and met the handsome stranger face to face.

A mighty change came over Crabber Grab.

His knees knocked together, his hands shivered as one stricken with the palsy, and his face grew ghastly white.

"You—you living?" he gasped, tottering back in the moonlight. "No—no! go 'way; you are dead! It's a ghost—it's a ghost!"

CHAPTER X.

GODFREY DARTWORTH.

THE stranger smiled; and in the cold, cynical movement of his lips there lurked a sadness, deeper far than there is power in the feeble coupling of words to express.

"No," he said, shaking his head, while the moonlight upon the whiteness of his face made him as a dead man; "no, Crabber Grab, I am not dead, I am not a ghost—I am a living man, and I have come back for my rights."

"I—I have never wronged you," murmured Crabber, growing braver now that he was assured the man lived. "You know I speak the truth, H—"

"Hush!" cried the stranger, clapping his hand over the lawyer's mouth just as he began the name. "That man is dead; do you understand? I am the same, yet I choose now to be another. You may call me Godfrey Dartworth."

Crabber Grab bowed lowly and resumed his customary cringing tone and manner.

"Very well, my dear sir," he whined. "You may rely upon my fidelity."

Godfrey Dartworth—for such he must be to us—shrugged his shoulders.

Either Crabber Grab did not see the action or he misinterpreted it, for he went on with his speech as though there had been no interruption.

"You wish to be 'Godfrey Dartworth,' my dear sir; well, trust to me to keep your secret; it is as safe with me, my dear boy, as though I knew it not."

"Yes," responded Dartworth coldly; "you will keep it because it would ruin all your plans to betray it. Did you think I was a fool when I revealed myself to you? Bah! no; I knew you dare not give the secret to other ears!"

Crabber Grab rolled his eyes heavenward, and moved his hands as though washing them.

"Saints! how I am misjudged," he whined. "Surely, my dear friend, you cannot doubt my honesty?"

"I had rather you would not press me too hard upon that subject."

A poisonous glitter shot from Crabber Grab's eyes.

For a moment he forgot his saintly bearing, and glancing up, said sharply:

"In a word, then, Godfrey Dartworth, you do not think me an honest man?"

"No."

"And you do think me——"

"A hypocrite, a scoundrel, and a thief! Precisely, Crabber Grab, since you will have it."

The villainous lawyer waited for nothing more.

He forgot everything, save that this was the truth, and that this man who spoke it would be a fortune to him dead, while living he was a barrier; his hand sought his bosom, something bright glittered in his fingers, and without a word of warning he leaped upon Godfrey Dartworth.

The man had evidently a past knowledge of Crabber Grab, for he was looking for some such occurrence as this, and before the knife in the lawyer's hand could descend, he found his throat and his wrist clutched in a grip of steel.

Wresting the knife away with one hand, Godfrey Dartworth flung it off in the moonlight, and shaking Grab's skinny form with the other, lifted him from his feet and hurled him in a heap to the grass.

"You see, I have rather underrated your character," said Dartworth, coolly. "I should have added assassin."

He folded his arms and looked down at the gaunt, trembling form at his feet.

"Miserable, cringing cur," he rejoined; "and it is into your puny power Felecia Clinton has allowed herself to fall. Bah! she is not the wily trickster I credited her with being. Her vaulting ambition has o'erleaped itself, and you are the filthy mire into which she has fallen."

Crabber Grab struggled to his feet.

"Don't be so hard," he cringed—"don't, please don't! If I sinned just now I did it in the heat of anger at your insult. That I am an honest man I swear to you—an honest, church-going, God-fearing man!"

Godfrey Dartworth's lip curled contemptuously.

"Bah!" he said. "Heaven be praised, Christians of your kind are scarce. But I have not come here to trifle. Look you—you are possessed of private papers belonging to Mrs. Clinton?"

"No—on my honor, no!" cried Grab. "I swear to you you are mistaken, my dear friend."

"Never mind wasting words; I saw you reading them this very night, saw you look at the picture when coming down the road. But this matters little; I do not wish them; you may keep them for all the good they may do you."

"Oh, thanks—thanks, a thousand times."

"Thank me for nothing," interposed Dartworth. "I thought you swore on your honor you did not possess these papers."

"No—no, you are mistaken," smiled Grab. "I said I had a few, that was all; and as to swearing, I never do that—it is evil, and I should expect to be stricken dead to the earth at any moment."

Dartworth turned upon his heel and strode away in disgust, but remembering he had not completed his task, he stopped suddenly, and retracing his footsteps, went back to Crabber Grab.

"Look you," he said; "I need a lawyer, but you and I can have no dealings in common, my fine fellow. When it is time, I shall seek a solicitor; until then, you must cease your persecutions of Mrs. Clinton, and let her go free, for you are wise enough to understand that I can block your little game easily. Good-night, my honest man; take my advice; shun the evil ways of the world and you will go up some day in a blaze of your own virtue, like—Thingamy! Good-night!"

He passed on down through the pines, and before Crabber Grab could fairly recover himself he was gone.

"Duped, lost!" he growled, stamping his feet upon the ground. "Just when all was looking so bright, just as I had begun to count upon my gains, this wretched being whom the whole world fancies is dead, puts in an appearance and forbids me to continue. Maledictions! does he think now that the game is fairly treed I shall step aside and allow him to knock it down at his will? No—no—no! I won't do it. I have had the trials of the chase, now I shall have the pleasures of the conquest."

"Beware, Godfrey Dartworth! braver men than you have fallen by treachery. Warning for warning: keep out of dark places and you may live long. As it is, I shall meet Mrs.

Clinton at the Blasted Oak to-morrow, and I shall claim the reward of my virtue."

And with these words he pushed open the door of the hut and passed in.

The hallway was as dark as Egypt.

He put out his hand, felt the rickety old balusters, and began to ascend a narrow staircase that led up to the rooms above, from the windows of which the light was shining and where he had seen his wife.

Reaching the landing, he groped his way to the first door, and rapped heavily.

"Who's there?" called out a harsh voice from within.

"Me."

"Who's me?" demanded Becky, evidently having been previously warned to be fully aware who was at the door before opening it.

"Crabber," replied Grab.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Wait a moment; I was preparing his supper."

Who the "he" alluded to might be Crabber Grab did not demand, a fact which seemed to prove that he was well aware.

The hurried shuffle of feet in untidy slippers was heard upon the bare floor, then the sound of bolts being drawn, and the door was swung open.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECRET OF THE TWELVE BARS.

BECKY GRAB appeared in the aperture, a flaming candle held high above her fiery-red head.

"Come in!" she said, stepping aside for her worthy husband to pass her.

Crabber Grab shuffled into the room, closed the door, and drew the bolts.

Becky regarded her spouse earnestly for a moment, and said, as she set down the candle:

"What's the matter with you, Grab? You look white as a ghost!"

Crabber flung off his coat with an oath and threw himself into a chair.

"Why wouldn't I look white?" he demanded. "You would if you had undergone such an ordeal as I have."

"What ordeal? What are you talking of?"

Grab drew a chair up before his own and motioned his wife to seat herself.

Becky deposited her lean anatomy hurriedly, and watched her worthy spouse.

"Is there any danger of being overheard, Becky?"

"No; what has come over you, Grab? Have you been drinking?"

"I wish that was all! Listen, Becky, he's alive!"

"He? Who?"

Crabber bent over and whispered in her ear, too fearful to speak aloud.

The whispered words had scarcely passed his lips ere Becky sprang up and clutched his arm.

"He—he living!" she gasped. "How do you know that?"

"I saw him."

"You saw him?"

"Yes; an instant since, in the path without."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"Ha! then you did not let him escape?"

"On the contrary, I did."

Becky's Gorgon eye turned upon him savagely.

"Crabber Grab," she said, speaking with dreadful earnestness, "do you mean to sit there and tell me that you saw this man—saw him alone in that dreary, lonesome place—and did not kill him? Bah! I'm ashamed of you."

"But, Becky, my love——"

"Don't speak to me! Idiot—coward! Why are such beings as you born men? Bah! you have the soul of a worm—cringe and be trodden on."

"Ay, but even the crushed worm will turn."

"Well, what good does it do? Worms have no sting! Let them turn; the crusher can laugh and tread on them again. Oh, why wasn't I born a man?"

"Becky, listen——"

"Don't speak to me, I tell you! I'm ashamed of you. Is this to be the end of all our plotting? Now mark me, Crab, you must kill this man!"

"That's precisely what I intend to do, my dear."

"Oh, it is, eh? Then there is a little spark of manhood left in you after all! Why didn't you do this at first? not let him slip through

your fingers when you had him foul, and then come and say what you intend to do."

"If you will listen to me, I will explain."

"You will, eh?" snarled Becky, who was a bit of a shrew. "Just as though I had interrupted you! You might have told me long ago, without wasting so much time in talking."

Crabber Grab rolled his eyes heavenward: but it was as much as his life was worth to venture an expostulation, so he avoided the point and commenced his relation of how he had attempted Godfrey Dartworth's life in the wooded lane, and of how he had been anticipated and foiled.

All this while Becky had been sitting silent, her hands crossed in her lap, and her terrible eye fixed upon him. We say "terrible" from the fact of its being like a serpent's; and as Becky possessed but this one optic, which pierced him through and through when it settled upon him, it is safe to admit that Crabber Grab stood in religious awe of it. He would no more have dared to lie with that green ogle fastened upon him, than he would have dared to swallow a dose of arsenic. In point of fact, he swore by that eye as the most thrilling and awe-inspiring witness he could conjure up. Just now it rolled and glittered wickedly, so that he knew from past experience there was something of import concocting beneath the caroty covering of her head.

"Well, you're not such a fool as I thought," was the tender reply she gave him when he had concluded his narration, "but Heaven knows you are a big enough one as it is! Why in the world don't you carry a pistol instead of that foolish little toy of a dirk? Who would have heard the report in this out-of-the-way place, I should like to know? and you would have 'dropped' him like a log. But no! you will have your own way, Crabber!" and that horrible ogle settled full upon him; "if you fail the next time, look out for squalls, that's all."

"I shall not fail, my dear," ventured Grab.

"Mind you don't. Now tell me what happened up at Larchmere. Did you take down my last pride? The hussy! we shall see if she will gather up her dress and elevate her nose in the air the next time she meets me!"

Crabber thereupon proceeded to relate all of the strange interview with Mrs. Clinton; but as the reader is acquainted with what transpired upon that interesting occasion, it will be needless to repeat it here. Suffice it to say that Becky Grabb was exceedingly well pleased, and voted her husband's sharpness in refusing to meet the widow upon the lonely lake, the wisest thing he had ever been guilty of doing.

For some minutes she appeared to be lost in the deepest thought; but suddenly her eye wiggled ominously, and then settled upon Crabber in a way which fully acquainted him with the fact that something was coming.

"Grab!"

"Yes, my dear."

"I've an idea."

"All right, my dear, what is it?"

Becky looked around cautiously for a second, although she had before told Crabber there was no danger of being overheard, and putting her lips down to his ear in the mysterious way affected by woman, whispered something quickly—something, too, with which her lord and master (hem), seemed to be hugely pleased, judging from the way he smiled and the vigor with which he slapped his lean thigh, and ejaculated:

"Becky, you're a trump!"

"Well, p'raps I am and p'raps I hain't—but some men would a'made a fortune out of me before this," was the modest reply of Becky, as she arose from her seat and went to the table where a bowl of milk and a small "chunk" of meat were placed. "We're forgetting 'Crazy'—he hasn't had a mouthful since morning. I was too busy reading such a fascinating novel to attend to him through the day, but I was getting his supper when you came in. There! it is all ready. Take up the candle, Grab, and follow me."

Crabber Grab lifted the candle, and followed his worthy spouse out into the narrow hallway.

Passing down the rickety stairs, they pushed open a door and entered a dingy, unoccupied room, the bare floor of which was very neatly sanded, this being the only appearance of even passing attention through out the whole apartment.

"Close the door, Grab, and see to the windows."

Crabber reported everything secure.

Stooping down Becky brushed away a handful of sand, exposing to view an iron ring.

Inserting her fingers under this, she pulled up a trap, exposing to view a flight of steps, down which Crabber led the way while Becky followed, after closing the trap above her.

They were in a narrow, underground passage, at the extreme end of which stood a thick, oaken door, before which was another composed of twelve stout iron bars.

Becky fumbled in her pocket for a moment, then produced a singular-looking key, and unlocking both doors, pushed them open and passed in.

The air was damp and chilly, and by the aid of the candle they could see a tattered form curled up on a heap of straw in one corner of the cellar.

His hair and beard had certainly not been dressed or cut in years; his white, haggard face was turned towards them, and at the sound of their entrance he opened a pair of staring, vacant eyes, and glared at them.

His clothes were a mass of rags, and barely clung upon his attenuated body.

A single glance was sufficient to prove that he was mad.

He lifted his head as Becky drew near, and whined in a thick, unnatural voice:

"Take me—ck—take me back! Don't kill me—don't! Ugh! the water is so cold. Mercy—mercy!"

There was a heavy stick lying by, and picking it up, Becky dealt him a heavy blow upon the head, and thrust the food towards him.

"Shut up that row, and eat!" she cried.

One might wonder why the poor wretch did not spring upon her, but as he put forth his hands with their long, talon-like nails, he revealed the presence of a heavy chain, which was secured around his waist, and attached to a staple driven into the wall. Who and what this poor, miserable creature was only his captors knew!

CHAPTER XII.

BY NIGHT, AT THE BLASTED OAK.

BECKY GRAB and her hypocritical spouse drew back into the corner of the cellar, and conversed in whispers while this singular being was demolishing his evening meal, eating voraciously and with all the primitive inelegance of those wild, woodland dwarfs, ancient lore tells us once peopled our world.

It was evident that "Crazy," as they were wont to call him, was the subject of this whispered conversation, for they glanced at him from time to time and nodded their heads in his direction.

At the same time he regarded them strangely, and an acute observer might have been tempted to believe, by the occasional flashes of intelligence that shot from his eyes when so doing, that his mind was not so thoroughly clouded as Becky and Crabber believed; in a word that his madness was but a mask that covered a deep, crafty sanity, hidden for some purpose best known to himself.*

After having finished his meal, Crazy pushed back the empty bowl, and with a grunt of approval, curled himself up on the straw and closed his eyes.

Still the lawyer and his wife talked on; never noting that from time to time the eyelids of the madman lifted slightly, and the great, glittering orbs beneath fixed themselves upon them with a hateful glare.

Could that intelligent look, that glance of hatred, come from the eyes of a maniac?

No!

Whoever "Crazy" might be, it was past a doubt that he was a sane man.

He watched his captors keenly, and when they cast a look in his direction, his eyelids closed, and to all appearances he was sleeping soundly.

The whispered conversation between Crabber and Becky Grab went on for a few moments longer, then the woman tapped her husband upon the shoulder, and said:

"Come; let us go up stairs. He has finished."

* An instance of this kind was lately brought to light in the asylum for the insane at Florence, where a man feigned insanity for seven years in order to test the feelings of those whom his will declared his heirs. The trial over this affair is still on.

THE AUTHOR.

She picked up the empty bowl, motioned Grab toward the door, and in a few moments Crazy heard the click of the locks and the echo of his jailers' footsteps upon the steps leading to the trap-door.

The secret of the twelve bars was once more hidden from the eyes of the world.

Once alone, Crazy sat up in the straw and shook his clenched hand at the barred door.

"Monsters!" he groaned. "How long will Heaven permit this outrage to continue? All these weary years I have been shut out from the light of Heaven; is it to go on for as many more? Oh, God! what have I done to merit such punishment as this?"

He buried his face in his hands and wept like a child.

For an instant only this fearful paroxysm of grief swayed him, then he dashed away his tears, and kneeling in the straw, muttered:

"I will escape—I will! So long have I feigned madness in the weary hope that, thinking me harmless, they might allow me a few hours' freedom, or, at least, guard me less cautiously, and I shall not give up until I have attained my end! Heaven give me strength to suffer and bear in silence all the indignities these wretches heap upon me, and, in mercy, send me one ray of hope!"

* * * * *

On the following night, just when all was still and the little town lay wrapped in slumber, the door opening upon the wooded lane where Crabber Grab had attacked Godfrey Dartworth, creaked upon its hinges, and a thin, lanky form glided out, crossed the moonlit space, and made its way towards the pines.

This figure was clad in the everyday garments of the lawyer, and as it passed on in the moonlight one might easily have recognized—Crabber Grab.

Passing on down the pine lane, he ran across the narrow road, and instead of going toward Larchmere Grange—for on this night, the reader will remember, he was to meet Mrs. Clinton—he vaulted a low paling upon the opposite side, and disappeared into a dense thicket beyond.

Birds and beasts, scared from their sleep by this untimely intrusion, fled on deeper into the wood, making the air resound with their screeches; but the lawyer seemed not to hear them, so deeply was he buried in thought.

One less matter-of-fact, less worldly than Crabber Grab, might have shuddered in the darkness and the loneliness of this terrible place, but he pressed steadily onward, never turning to the right or left, and seemingly dead to everything around.

The walk to the rendezvous—the blasted oak—was fully a mile from Crabber's house, and having at length covered this amount of ground, he emerged from the shadow of the trees into a clear, moonlit space, in the center of which stood an old oak tree, riven from top to bottom by the lightning, its gaunt, somber boughs stretching out like arms against the brilliance of the moon and the sky.

Pulling his hat down over his face, Crabber Grab strode forward to the blasted oak.

"Mrs. Clinton!" he called, speaking low and cautiously. There was no reply.

"Humph!" muttered Crabber, "not here yet. Well, I can wait."

He sat down at the foot of the tree and leaned his head back against its riven trunk.

The moments passed slowly by. There was no sign of the woman's approach.

"Does she mean to dupe me?" muttered Crabber, springing to his feet and pacing around the tree.

"No! for at that instant a low rustle was heard among the leaves, a woman's figure, muffled and cloaked, glided across the moonlit space and came toward him.

"You are on time, I see," she said, with a poor attempt at a smile, and in the moonlight Crabber could see that her face was ghastly white.

"Is it you, my dear?" came back the cringing reply. "I have been waiting for you."

"So I supposed, but I could not help it. It was impossible to leave before without being seen, and that, you are aware, might ruin all my hopes and plans."

"I do, indeed, my dear," murmured Crabber, rubbing his hands as though washing them—a trick of his.

"But you are too wise to put your head into the lion's mouth, my dear, far too wise."

Mrs. Clinton regarded him strangely.

"Perhaps," she said. "What ails you? You speak oddly—your voice sounds thick and unnatural."

"Very likely, my dear; I have a sore throat. Have you brought the money?"

"Yes—partly in cash, and part in check payable on demand."

"Ah! you are wise, my dear."

"Where are the letters and the diary?"

Crabber fumbled in the inner pocket of his coat, and extended a little packet of letters and little black book to Mrs. Clinton.

The woman snatched them hurriedly, her breath coming in gasps, and her face growing red the moment she touched them, and then flung a leathern purse upon the ground.

"There is your pay," she said, speaking in a hoarse whisper. "Count it."

"Thank you, my dear, thank you!" muttered Grab, stooping down and emptying the contents of the purse upon the ground.

Mrs. Clinton bent over him, one hand hidden beneath the folds of her black cloak, and watched his skinny fingers move in and out about the money.

She cast a hurried glance around—not a soul in sight.

Quick as a flash her hand slipped from beneath her cloak; something bright glittered in the moonlight, and then the upraised arm fell—fell with a sharp, rapid stroke, and with a single moan the figure at her feet rolled over, clutched the grass, tearing it up in handfuls, and then lay quite still.

Felecia Clinton cast one horrified look at the silent form, then withdrew the knife, wiped it on the grass, and gathering up the money, fled at all speed from the place.

She had just crossed the moonlit space, and was on the point of darting into the thicket, when a figure slipped through the trees and stood directly before her.

It was Crabber Grab, living and well.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WOMAN'S WORK.

FELECIA CLINTON staggered back with a gasp, and the blood-stained paper-knife, with its finely tempered point, fell to the ground.

Step by step she slunk away, and with folded arms Crabber Grab advanced until the light of the moon streamed fully down upon his cadaverous face, and left no room for doubt regarding his personality.

"Crabber Grab!" the widow muttered. "Then it is you?"

"Whom else did you think, my dear, he leered.

Faint and trembling, Felecia Clinton could only lean against a tree, and gasp:

"Who—who, then, did I meet at the blasted oak?"

"My wife," he said; "Mrs. Becky Grab, at your service."

"Your wife?"

"Precisely, my dear. Two or three times you had treated her disdainfully, and being a woman, my dear, she wished to see how you would act when in trouble. She persuaded me to allow her to wear my clothes and meet you. Quite a neat little affair, my dear, wasn't it? But you see I wasn't quite sure of the result, so I took the pains to follow her."

Mrs. Clinton was leaning against the tree and gasping for breath.

Crabber Grab rejoined:

"What's the matter, my dear? You look sick."

"I—I am quite well—only a little chilled by the night air. My nerves are so weak and shattered, you know. Please let me pass. Good-night!"

She had tottered from the tree, and was on the point of moving away when Crabber Grab caught sight of the pile of money in her hand.

His face underwent a change; he stepped before her, and barred her passage onward.

"Stop!" he said, speaking quickly and nervously. "Tell me why you carry all that money?"

Mrs. Clinton drew herself up proudly.

"I fancy you are aware I am rich," she said.

"Of course, my dear, or I should never have put the screws on so tightly. Well?"

"Well, is there anything strange in my having a handful of notes, then?"

"Ordinarily, no; but reflect. To-night you were to pay me fifty thousand dollars for that packet of letters I see in your bosom."

"Well?"

"Well, my dear, it is hardly likely you

would carry twice that amount upon your person, for there must be nearly as much more in your hand there."

Felecia Clinton saw the trap into which she had fallen, and the glitter in her eye was something more than belladonna.

"You—you are mistaken," she faltered. "I have done this thing. Your wife, since it was she, has the other money with her—I gave it to her an instant since."

"Indeed?" replied Grab, with an ironical smile.

"You would not pretend to doubt me, sir?"

"I'd rather you wouldn't press me too far upon that subject, my dear."

"You grow impudent, sir. Good-night."

Once again she essayed to pass him, but Crabber Grab caught her wrist and held her back.

"Stop a minute," he said, sternly. "If you have given my wife this amount, you cannot refuse to let me have possession of the sum you carry. If I find that Becky has the other, I will return it. I swear it on my honor."

Terrified as she was, Mrs. Clinton could yet find strength to laugh at his assurance.

"This is not a farce," she said. "Your honor! Ha-ha-ha!"

"Precisely, my dear—you ought to understand it, for it is about the same value as yours. Give me the money, or I swear to you you shall not return to Larchmere Grange to-night."

"You would kill me, no doubt, to prevent it?"

"Why not? Have you seen a child at a round game double its cards by tearing its counter in two? Lives are counters to me in the game I am playing, and as readily would I sweep you from my path, Felecia Devereux-Estmere-Clinton, as I would crush this weed beneath my foot."

At the mention of my her triple name, Mrs. Clinton staggered back with a gasp, and crushing the money in her hand, hurled it at his feet.

"There!" she cried, "take it—take it! I trust to your honor to return it. Now let me pass."

He stepped aside with a mocking bow and allowed her to sweep by him.

"Good-night, my dear," he uttered sardonically.

Felecia Clinton deigned him no reply, and gathering up her skirts, fled swiftly into the wood, hugging those fatal letters to her bosom.

Once out of his sight she paused for breath, and muttered:

"I have slain the wrong one, but there will be no fear. Those damning proofs—my letters to Harold Devereaux—are in my power, and once within the walls of Larchmere Grange, I have only to consign them to the flames and I am safe! Ah! Crabber Grab, when one eats macaroni with the devil, one must be careful not to burn his fingers. You have overstepped the bounds and now I can defy you. Who saw me leave Larchmere to-night? Not a living scul; and my maid will be willing to swear that she saw me asleep in bed before nine o'clock. The letters once destroyed, how will you tear me down from the height to which I have climbed, until the shifty adventuress has become a woman of virtue and power? The game is all mine now, for to speak of Reginald Clinton's will, will put you into the halter with me! I am free-free!"

And once again she ran on, stopping not this time until she had reached the gates of Larchmere Grange.

There was not a sign of life upon any side, and pushing open the gates she slipped in, ran along under the shadow of a dense hedge of lilacs, until reaching a small door in the left wing, she took a key from her pocket, unlocked it and passed hurriedly in.

For an instant all was still as death; then a hedge of azaleas, behind a large bed of cacti near the little door, stirred as though by the wind, and the figure of a man issued from their leafy embrace and stood in the moonlight in the very center of the path.

It was Godfrey Dartworth.

Just now his face seemed whiter than usual, but it bore no trace of the least emotion.

He stood there like a statue and gazed up at the widow's window for a moment.

For a moment only; then he turned upon his heel, and, without having uttered the

faintest sound, disappeared in the darkness of the night.

Meanwhile Mrs. Clinton had slunk up the little staircase, and reaching the hallway with which her room communicated, moved cautiously along to her door.

It was locked; she was too crafty, having allowed the servant to see her in bed, to leave it open.

She fumbled in her pocket a moment, found the key, and, inserting it, gave it a slow, nervous turn.

The lock clicked faintly and the door swung open.

With a gasp of joy the widow glided in and closed it gently, drawing the bolt into the socket without the slightest sound, for she feared again to turn the key lest she should be less successful this time, and give the alarm to some one, which meant death to her plans.

Once this done, she flung off her outer garments, and running to the windows she drew the heavy curtains close together so that the very faintest ray of light could not penetrate into the night of the outer world.

Turning to the fireplace, she took the lamp, stood it upon the floor in the shadow of the chimney, and then lit it.

This done, she took the bundle of letters from her breast.

They were tied with a faded red ribbon, and among them was the diary, and the daguerreotype of Harold Devereaux.

She opened the faded velvet case and looked down upon the features of the man who had loved her so madly.

Without the least show of remorse for the memory of how she had repaid that love, she tore the glass from the case and held it over the lamp until the flame had scorched it; then with her dress she wiped away the soot, and the glass was clear—the likeness had disappeared!

Rising to her feet, she opened her desk and laid the little square of clear glass among her papers.

"To-morrow I can dispose of it," she muttered.

Once again she turned her attention to the packet of letters, and tearing up an old newspaper, she covered them with the scraps, setting them alight, and kneeling before the fire so that the reflection of the flame could not be seen beneath the door.

In a few moments the letters, the diary and the daguerreotype case were reduced to a heap of ashes.

She then took a sheet of paper from her desk and wrote upon it:

LARCHMERE GRANGE, Thursday.

"MY DEAR FRIEND:—Your letter received. I am glad to hear you are now fully recovered."

Applying the bottom of the sheet to the lamp, she allowed it to burn up to the writing, then extinguished it and threw it among the ashes of the others.

Her purpose was clear; the burned papers would be found by the slave whose duty it was to clean her room, and the half-destroyed letter would lead to the belief that she had been writing, and burned several sheets as useless.

She regarded her work with a smile of satisfaction, disrobed, put out the light, and went to bed.

Her sleep was calm and dreamless; she was not one of those weak creatures whose slumbers are filled with the echo of their waking thoughts, for if ever Hermes, whom the Greeks say made women, put an iron will and a heart of stone beneath a feminine exterior, it fell to Felecia Clinton's share.

CHAPTER XIV.

BLANK PAPERS.

CRABBER CRAB stood for some minutes with his eyes fixed upon the wood just where Mrs. Clinton had disappeared, and said not a word.

At length brought to a sense of his situation by the money at his feet, he smiled, and said:

"Ten to one this is the money meant for me. I'll wager she 'bilked' Becky somehow, and that's a feather in her cap; for if ever there was a keen woman, I, flatter myself it's my wife! And hang me if—"

He paused suddenly, and his face grew ghastly white.

He had begun picking up the money when

his eye fell upon something glittering in the moonlight.

It was a knife with a flat, ivory handle and a keen, sharp point still red with blood which had been imperfectly wiped off.

With a sudden shriek, Crabber snatched it up and held it out in the moonlight.

"It's hers—it's Felecia Clinton's!" he gasped. "I have seen it before at Larchmere Grange. It is her paper knife; a false point has been put to it, and—this blood, my God! this blood! Am I awake? Ah, I recall her haste to get away, her fright at seeing me, and the presence of this money. Oh, I can no longer doubt—she has killed Becky!"

He sprang to his feet with an oath and shook the fatal blade above his head.

"Woe, Felecia Clinton!" he cried, "woe to you if you have slain Becky Grab, for you are still in my power, and I will exert it to its fullest extent, but I will crush you!"

He gathered up the money—even the thought of his wife lying cold and dead at the foot of the blasted oak failing to kill his avariciousness—and crowding it into his breast, he sprang up again and ran on to the rendezvous.

Almost the first thing upon which his eyes fell was Becky, lying as Felecia Clinton had left her, her face buried in the rank excrecence, and her hands rigidly clutched among the grass and weeds!

He bent down, turned her over on her face and pressed his hand over her heart.

He could feel it throbbing gently, and, lifting the bleeding form in his arms, he turned into the woodland path and picked his way cautiously homeward.

Becky never stirred all that while, and laying her upon the ground, he opened the door which led into the old shanty.

Once more lifting her in his arms, he bore her up the rickety stairs and laid her upon the bed.

It was but the work of an instant to light the candle, and having done this, Crabber proceeded to bathe her face and hands, calling upon her incessantly:

"Becky, Becky, my love, wake up—speak to me."

But for some moments she refused to stir—it was probably the obstinacy of her sex present even at this fatal hour—but at length she gave signs of returning animation, and Grab was overjoyed.

At the expiration of ten minutes after the first sign, her eyelids quivered and lifted.

Once that Gorgon eye swept around the room, then settled upon Crabber, and while he looked he saw it grow dimmer, a film gathered over it, her hands quivered once, convulsively, then her jaw dropped—she was dead.

She had never spoken once since the fatal blow had been stricken.

He knelt down beside the bed and buried his face in the counterpane.

He knew now that he was alone; and mingled with his grief there was a certain sort of satisfaction that that terrible ogle had wobbled around for the last time, and that he would never again catch the music of her greeting:

"Grab! you're a fool!"

In a few minutes he arose, white and trembling.

It had been bad enough to stay in the house with her living, but dead—"

He left the candle burning beside the corpse, and slinking from the room, went out into the garden at the rear of the shanty, and snatching up a spade, commenced to dig.

Fortunately the ground was soft, and so, by the light of the moon alone, he dug her grave.

Returning to the house when his work was through, he wrapped the body in a sheet, lifted it in his arms, and carried it down to the grave.

Three hours ago she had stood on this very spot a living woman.

Softly, reverently he lowered the stiffening form into the grave, and then closed it up.

An hour after he stood there alone in the world, and as he turned back to the house, a fearful imprecation quivered upon his lips.

And so the night fell at Larchmere Grange, and at the shanty among the pines.

If there had been no dreams in Felecia Clinton's slumbers, Crabber Grab's were full of them, for now more than ever was he set upon his purpose, and the widow had yet to learn of her grand mistake.

Crabber Grab did not arise next morning until ten o'clock.

He cooked his own meal, dressed with unusual care, and after feeding "Crazy," locked up the house, and sallied forth to Larchmere Grange.

Unlike him, the widow had been up since daylight, and had left orders that he was not to be admitted.

Upon reaching the mansion, Crabber passed through the gates and made his way directly to the front door as usual.

He had placed his hand upon the bell to ring it, when the door was thrown open, and a spruce young negress who had evidently been watching for him, dropped him a courtesy, and inquired:

"What yer want, marser?"

"Is your mistress in?"

"Yes, marser."

"Tell her Mr. Grab is here."

"Missie dun see nobody nor nuffin' to-day."

"Well, she'll see me. You go and tell her."

The girl ran quickly up the stairs, and returned again with a card, upon the back of which was written in the unmistakable tracey of the widow:

"I am no more at home to you. Go!"

Crabber Grab read it carefully, a smile moved his thin lips, and turning to the girl, he asked, suddenly:

"Can you read, Rosa?"

"No, marser."

He took a pencil from his pocket and wrote upon the card:

"See me, or what happened at the blasted oak shall be given to the world."

"Take this back to your mistress," he said, giving the girl a piece of money.

The message was carried and the same card returned with three words upon it:

"I defy you!"

"We shall see," mnttered Crabber, drawing a packet of letters from his pocket and giving one to the girl. "Give that to your mistress; tell her that in two minutes it will be too late to recall me."

Rosa took the letter and ran up to the widow's boudoir.

Mrs. Clinton snatched it from her, spread it out, and then with a shriek, let it fall to the floor.

"Quick—quick! send him up!" she cried.

It was a letter from Harold Devereaux to Felecia, his wife, and she knew now that she had been duped; that she had paid fifty thousand dollars and committed a murder for a packet of—*blank papers!*

Crabber Grab held the originals still.

CHAPTER XV.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"Fool—fool that I was!" she screamed, "to be duped by this wretch. Oh, these fatal letters; would to God I had made Becky Grab show me them before I committed this hideous and frightful deed. But no! In my madness I walked blindly into the trap they had prepared for me. I am duped—duped!"

She walked wildly up and down the room, beating the air with her clenched hands.

The door swung noiselessly on its hinges, and when she turned again Crabber Grab stood on the threshold, facing her.

For one moment it seemed as though all the blood in her body flew to her face, then it died out, leaving her deadly pale, as her eyes met those of the wily lawyer.

He was smiling his sweetest and rubbing his hands together in that singular way of his; but despite the blandness of his smile, despite the cringing demeanor, she read in those cold, steely eyes a bitter, unrelenting hate; a remorseless, inexorable plot to crush her now in the prime growth of her villainy.

She knew the ordeal had come and resolved to brave it still.

"Well, you are here, are you?" she said. "Close the door and come in."

Silently, smilingly, Crabber Grab did her bidding.

"Sit down."

"Thank you, my dear, I prefer to stand."

"Well, stand then. A pretty trick you have played me. You have charged me fifty thousand dollars for a packet of worthless papers."

Crabber Grab bowed his head and smiled again. He smiled always when his hate was the bitterest, or when he was meditating a cruel blow.

"Precisely, my dear."

"Well, having charged me this exorbitant

sum, now give me Harold Devereaux's letters."

"I couldn't think of such a thing, my dear!"

"And why not? Have I not paid for them?"

"No!" and the piercing eyes shot her a poisonous glance while the thin lips smiled. "All the money you possess could not buy them now. That which you have given me pays for the murder."

Felecia Clinton shuddered.

"You know, then?"

"Yes, I know! Becky is dead, slain by your cruel hands, and I have come here to tell you to prepare yourself, my dear."

"Prepare myself! For what?" and she grew deadly white as she spoke. A vague sense of what he really meant had dawned upon her.

"For the scaffold, my dear!"

"The scaffold!"

"Yes; our financial dealings are over, now I go to put the authorities on your track."

He had turned to go, but in an instant a desperate scheme presented itself to her.

She knew by the one he had sent that those fatal letters were upon him, and uttering a piercing shriek, she threw her writing desk from the table so that the contents were scattered over the floor, and springing forward, seized the lawyer by the throat.

"Fool!" he hissed, "do you hope, with your puny strength, to wrest these letters from me?"

But no such thought entered her brain.

"Help! Murder! Help!" she shrieked at the top of her voice, winding her arms tightly around him. "Help—help, or I die!"

He was at a loss to understand what she could possibly mean by this singular cry, but as her fingers, clasped so tightly about his throat, were squeezing the breath from his body, he made an effort to shake her off.

But her grip was one of iron, and he knew that he must do something to free himself or he would strangle.

Already the slaves, alarmed by her piercing cries, were rushing upstairs, and feeling his brain swim, he turned and dealt her a blow in the face.

This was exactly what Felecia Clinton wished, and releasing her hold of him, she fell back to the floor, her nose and lips bleeding, and screamed:

"Murder—murder!"

Crabber Grab stooped to raise her; she caught him by the hair, and at that moment the slaves burst open the door.

"Seize him," she shrieked. "He has robbed me."

Strong hands were laid upon Grab, and utterly bewildered, he was dragged back.

The blood-stained woman staggered to her feet.

"He was robbing me; I caught him. See, he has burst open my desk and taken out a packet of letters tied with a faded ribbon. Search him."

"It is a lie!" cried Grab. "The letters are—

"Cover his mouth. Don't let him speak. He is mad!"

Her order was obeyed, and while Grab struggled with a dozen blacks, another searched him, and drawing out the diary and the fatal letters, threw them to his mistress.

A glance told her they were the genuine ones, and in a tone of command, she said:

"Take him away. Put him on the high road and set the hounds on him if he makes an attempt to return! Go—go!"

Struggling, biting and kicking, Crabber Grab was hurried away, and the very moment she was alone, Mrs. Clinton plunged the letters into the grate, set them alight and stood over them until they were blackened ashes.

It had been diamond cut diamond, and she had won the day.

Crabber Grab knew now that she had beaten him, and did not attempt to force his way back into the grounds of Larchmere when once the slaves had flung him outside of the gates.

"Curse her—curse her—curse her!" he foamed, stamping the ground with his feet. "Let her beware; this night shall be her last, for I will never leave this spot until I have a chance to deal her her death blow. Fool that I was to bring the letters; idiot, not to divine her cunning scheme!"

He shook his clenched fist in the direction of her room, and turning away, hid himself

in a clump of pines to watch the first sign of her presence.

But the wily widow was far too cunning to venture out, and late that night, he turned away to go back to the hut, for he remembered that Crazy had nothing to eat since morning, and he was hungry himself.

Reaching the hut, he was surprised to find the door wide open.

He rushed in; the door of the empty room was also open, and by the moonlight he could see the trap was raised.

Snatching up a candle, he lit it and ran down stairs.

The twelve bars lay scattered on the floor, the cellar was empty—Crazy was gone!

With a howl he ran up the ladder, and as he reached the door he saw beyond the tree tops long, licking tongues of flame dart upward towards the skies.

The road was full of people, and loud, angry cries, mingled with the crash of firearms, burst upon the air.

Grab forgot everything, and ran down the wooded path to the road.

"Good God!" he cried, "Gilder Hargreaves' house is afire!"

Through the smoke and the flames he could see there was a battle raging on. Black and white were fighting for life, and through the mingled throng eight winged figures with the heads of beasts, and mounted on rearing horses, brandished their sabers and their axes and fought with demoniac fury against the whites.

"Wheel about! Fly!" shrieked a voice—that of "7." "On—on for safety in the great Dismal Swamp!"

Instantly the blacks fled in all directions, the Swamp Angels flew up the road, cheering and shrieking loudly, led on by "7" astride his white steed, and across the pommel of the saddle lay the body of Crazy.

On and on and on they flew, cutting off Gilder Hargreaves' men from the slaves until a mounted figure, slimmer and more boyish than the rest, bearing on its breast the numeral "8," dashed on to the swamp, leading the slaves to the secret winding path, and when the last one had been hidden, with a ringing cheer the rest of the Swamp Angels dashed away in the darkness.

On the following day Fort Sumter was fired upon, and war universally proclaimed between the North and South.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MEMORY OF THE PAST.

WHEN Godfrey Dartworth turned away from Larchmere Grange on the night when Felecia Clinton had dealt Becky Grab what proved to be her death blow, he went directly up the road leading to the great Dismal Swamp, and soon disappeared among the dark pines.

Perhaps the word "disappeared" may be questioned, for no living soul had seen him; but now the dark boughs so effectually covered him that it may be safely used, for he had "disappeared" from the scene; but as, for the reader's sake, we must follow him, to us he is still in sight.

All the while he had never uttered a word, but went on slowly, his hands clasped behind him, and his white, handsome face bent downward to the earth.

His features wore a look of trouble and perplexity, and it was evident he was thinking deeply over some affair of great import.

Still in silence, he reached the shores of Lake Drummond, when suddenly some newer thought appeared to strike him, for he came to a halt, a light broke over his face, and he stamped the ground impatiently with his foot.

"Fool!" he muttered, biting his lips savagely; "fool that I was not to have dreamed it! I have haunted the lawyer's hut for three days, and never yet have I been able to fathom those strange, dark words I heard Becky Grab use to her husband: 'Oh, Crazy's all right; use him for the last blow. I must feed him now!' And who can 'Crazy' be? Not a dog, for he would not be of use in a last blow, as she termed it. They have but one plot afoot—that against the mistress of Larchmere Grange, and to use this 'Crazy' in a last blow against her, he must be a living being."

"Yes, I am sure of it! What, then, is left for me but to return to Crabber Grab's hut and ferret out this mystery? and if 'Crazy' is whom I suspect, then it is time to act."

"Bless the chance which led me to follow

Felecia Clinton to-night, for now I have another link in the chain of blood in my hands; but I must be cautious, for, despite all my plans, she yet may escape me. The woman who plunged Harold Devereaux into the cold waters, who struck Becky Grab her death blow, and yet can sleep calmly and smile like a beautiful demon, is no weak enemy!"

He paused again for a moment, and appeared to be thinking.

"How shall I act?" he said, at length. "There seems at present no way of proving who and what this 'Crazy' is. I cannot hope to wrest the secret from Crabber Grab, and his wife will keep all her's now—in the grave. To enter the house by force, would be to expose myself to the mercy of Grab, and be perhaps shot down like a dog. And in that case who would be the wiser? No one knows me; no one but Grab has seen me, and I should never be missed. No! that will never do. Let me think, Ah! he will surely visit Larchmere Grange in the morning to rivet firmer the bond of crime between Felecia Clinton and himself, by the news of the murder. Good! I have hit it at last. I will break into the house then!"

A smile of pleasure glided over his face, and he went on toward the brink of the lake to a spot where the rushes grew thick and tall.

Pushing these aside, he disclosed a small boat moored among them.

The moon was bright, yet he lit a small lamp in the prow of the canoe, cast her off, and paddled toward a clump of blasted pines on the opposite shore of the lake—the entrance to the secret winding path amid the death-pit and the bog.

In and out among the little islands glided the boat, the lantern in its prow gleaming like a golden star, and the silvery radiance of the moon glittering ghostly white on the cold and silent waters.

A death-like spell seemed to have fallen upon the place, and the splash of the paddle echoed cold and horrible above it.

The slimy boughs dipped into the fetid waters and the pines moved like specters in the silence of the breeze.

Once a bat fluttered around the lantern, once an owl brushed his wig against Dartworth's cheek, but all these horrors were not new to him, else he had shuddered, while now he smiled and pushed straight on to the blasted pines without a tremor, without the fluttering of a nerve.

At length the little canoe had passed the last island, and shoots beneath the withered trees.

Dartworth arose, knotted a rope to a hanging bough, and scrambled out upon the small patch of solid ground.

Here in the shadow of the foliage stood a white horse, without a saddle or bridle.

Still Godfrey Dartworth did not appear either startled or horrified.

Was he, then, acquainted with the horrors of the great Dismal Swamp?

Did he also know its strange inhabitants?

It would seem so.

The horse gave a whinny of pleasure as he appeared, and going to it, Godfrey Dartworth patted its sleek and glossy neck.

"Poor Hercules, good boy!" he murmured.

The horse rubbed its great beautiful head against the man's arm, and pawed the ground as though pleased, indeed, to see him.

Stepping back a pace, Dartworth drew a silver whistle from his breast, and blew a long, piercing blast that echoed far off through the Heaven-deserted place.

Silence.

"Toot! hoot! wh—o—o—o!"

An owl takes up the echo.

Silence yet.

"Wh—e—e—e—e!"

The whistle is answered further off in the heart of the swamp.

Dartworth blew again.

Silence for an instant.

Then back there comes the answering call, and soon a man's voice, growing nearer and nearer, is heard to chant:

"The owl is hooting in yon bush,
Hoot—hoot!
Yonder oak tree's blasted branches,
Hoot—hoot!
Flame as spirits 'round it rush,
Hoot—hoot!
Hell of nature 'round me frown—"

Then the voice broke suddenly away, and Dartworth sang the final line:

"Destroying angels flutter down!"

Evidently this was a signal, for the next moment "6," with a pair of flaming torches, burst through the thick undergrowth following along the winding path, and then sank on his knee at Godfrey Dartworth's feet.

"Give me the torches," said Dartworth, taking them from the hand of the Swamp Angel, and fastening them in a cleft in one of the pines.

"'6,' I have a task for you. Here is money; change your attire, take the boat, go into town, and buy me a hammer, a cold chisel, and a file."

"6" made no reply, but stripping off his clothes plunged them into the hollow trunk of a near-by tree, where one could see another suit was lying.

He now appeared clad in the ordinary garb of a well-to-do southerner, and taking a soft hat from the tree, pulled it down over his brows, and sprang into the boat.

"When shall I return?" he asked, as he pushed the little craft out into the lake.

"Before daylight," was the reply. "I have use for them to-morrow morning, so do not under any pretext fail me."

"I will not, sir; you may rely upon me. And to-morrow night—"

"Good!" said Dartworth. "I see you have not forgotten. To-morrow night the Swamp Angels will descend upon Gilder Hargreaves' plantation and liberate his slaves."

"6" made no reply to this, but pushed further out into the lake.

Standing there beside the blasted pines, with one hand resting upon the neck of the white horse, Godfrey Dartworth watched the canoe with the flaming light in its prow glide in and out among the little islands; watched it in silence until it shot into the clump of rushes far off on the opposite bank, where, aided by the moonlight, he could see "6" arise and stalk off, until the trees beyond appeared to swallow him in their dark embrace, and the echo of his footsteps no longer smote the deadly stillness.

And for some minutes more he stood there, watching far out where the moonlight played upon the bosom of the lake, and the rushes stirred faintly yet noiselessly in the gentle breeze.

But he spoke not.

Yet it was not because no thoughts were coursing through his brain, for a pained look had come over his white and handsome face, and the staring eyes were misty with tears.

The past was upon him; and it must have been a sad one to conjure up this eloquence of grief in one who seemed hard and pitiless as marble.

And what was that past?
Who was Godfrey Dartworth?

Time only will answer both questions; but it was indeed a bitter past, yet Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, those three weird sisters of our fates, were gathering in the threads, and soon the wronged would be righted and all things made light as day.

And it was praying for this end that brought tears to Godfrey Dartworth's eyes to-night.

The horse at his side lifted its great head and neighed piteously, as though he would share his sorrows if he could not drive them away.

It seemed to arouse Dartworth to a sense of what he was and where he stood—it seemed to recall him from among the phantoms of the dead past, and bowing his head he buried his face in the noble creature's silken mane and wept—wept till the sobs convulsed his whole frame, and the arms he twined around the horse's neck quivered and shook with the tempest of his grief.

"Oh, God! when will it all end?" he moaned. "Oh, that I had died in my childhood rather than live to have my whole life embittered thus. God help me! I tremble to strike where I yet love. Love!" he repeated, lifting his face and clutching his teeth so that they grated harshly; "no, not love; that died years ago. It is hate—bitter, unrelenting, undying hate—and I will strike the blow, even though the love returns at the last minute, and the effort to do justice tears my heart from my bosom and hurls it in the dust for the whole world to trample on."

And then, as though the fury of his rage had spent his strength, and the strange love he vowed was living and yet dead in one breath, had come back with all its old-time force, he bowed his head again upon the horse's neck and wept.

Laugh at his tears if you will, reader, but

when a strong man weeps, it is indeed a piteous spectacle, an exhibition of grief not to be derided.

The torches in the tree flared and spluttered wildly, and the dense black smoke curled up above the rank and withered boughs, lending an awful somberness to the unhallowed scene that was, indeed, well-fitted to conjure up memories of the past if like Godfrey Dartworth's, it was one that no grave could bury and no coming joy could brush away.

"Pshaw! I am a child," he cried at length. "What have I to do with tears? They are for peevish schoolgirls, not for men. Those who think me heartless and cruel would laugh at this exhibition of womanish grief. Men call me a mystery, and they shall find me so. Ugh! this memory. Oh, if I could tear it out from my existence and be as I appear—a man of ice!

"But it is not to be; it is here—always here! In the heat of battle it will mock me, and that face with its tangled, golden curls will rise in all its young beauty before me when I strike, as though to unnerve my arm and bid me spare where I would kill. Bah! I must get over this! I need rest, and I must have it, for there is work for me to-morrow.

"If God spares me, by this hour to-morrow night I shall know the secret of the hut in the pine woods, and if it is as I feel in my heart it must be, the chain is in my hands complete, and I can strike—strike!

"Woe—woe to those who played with my life and sent me out upon the world a heart-broken, homeless wanderer, for then I will pay back the debt, and the executioner shall be the messenger of my revenge.

"Stalk blindfolded on, ye fools! the day, the hour is coming fast, and beware, then, the tower of hate which, like an avalanche, shall fall, and crush to ashes those who have lived by blood, and trampled on the heart of Godfrey Dartworth!"

He turned abruptly as he spoke and glided out of sight among the trees.

Five minutes passed—he did not reappear.

Had he then missed the path and sunk to his death in the foul embrace of the loathsome bog?

Minutes.

No sight, no sound.

Would he reappear, or dwelt he here among the blasted trees in the great Dismal Swamp?

Fifteen minutes, twenty—thirty!

Suddenly there breaks upon the air the loud, shrill whistle of the Swamp Angels, and as it is answered far on the depths of the lonely place a figure suddenly appears in the path—a figure all in black, with the head of a lion and the wings of a bat. Each black hand clutches a flaming torch, and on the bosom of his sable dress there is emblazoned in white the figure "7."

He utters not a word, only pushes aside the brushwood and peers into it as though he either fears or feels certain someone is hidden there, and the spot he scrutinizes so carefully is the place where Godfrey Dartmouth disappeared.

His hat lies near the edge of the path, and an alligator is snapping his jaws as though feasting upon some delicate morsel.

"7" wheels sharely, springs upon the back of the white steed, and clasping the torches in his upraised hands, dashes off into the heart of the swamp, leaving a long trail of black smoke clinging among the trees in his wake.

On and on till the distance swallows up his form, and only the fitful glimmer of the torches blazes and glistens will-o'-the-wisp-like through the boughs. And silence falls again over the great Dismal Swamp.

CHAPTER XVII.

TO THE RESCUE.

THE Swamp Angels were grouped in their cabin when "7" rode up to the door, dismounted and gave it a hearty rap.

It was unbarred quickly by "2".

"Oh, it's you, captain," the man said. "I thought it was. "6" left to meet you an hour ago. Where is he now?"

"Gone," responded "7." "Here "4," put up Hercules, and see that he is well fed."

He strode over to a slight, boyish figure in the corner, a figure which bore upon his breast the numeral "8" and gripped his hand heartily.

"Well, my lad," he said, "how are you feeling to-night?"

"Quite well, captain," responded "8". "I

am glad at your return; not only have I missed you, but I feared some danger had overtaken you. I wished to go in search of you, but "1" wouldn't hear of it."

"7" laughed heartily behind his lion mask.

"1" was quite right," he said, "and obeys my orders well. But you, my boy, should have been in bed before this; remember the work we have on hand for to-morrow night."

"I remember it well, sir, but I do not feel tired as yet. I will retire when I do. You will have no cause to complain of me to-morrow. I shall fight with you till death overtakes me, falling only with my face to the foe, and preserving the secrets of the Swamp Angels to the last gasp."

"You are a brave lad," said "7", with a thrill of admiration in his voice, "and all will yet be well for you."

He turned aside as he spoke and removed the lion's head from his shoulders, revealing the pale, handsome face of Godfrey Dartworth.

Drawing up his chair beside that of "8," or as he is better known to us, Arthur Clinton, he engaged in a long and whispered conversation with him, until the boy became tired and announced his intention of retiring.

The hour was late, and after a prayer to Heaven on behalf of the North, the Swamp Angels sought their couches.

Long before dawn, "6" returned with the tools Godfrey Dartworth had sent for, and at daybreak the Swamp Angels breakfasted and set about preparing their weapons for the task assigned them on the coming night.

It was the first blow for freedom, and they were eager and anxious for the day to speed away, although they knew not how soon after their effort all the horrors of a civil war would break over the land and place the first blot upon the escutcheon of America, and sully the fair fame of that band of welded lands—the United States. And who should say which side was right? The North performed a noble act in shattering the bondman's chains, but it left room for mourning, too; for the slave, once the equal of his master, forgot the good and remembered only the evil; and the being who yesterday licked the hand that fed him (licked it as a dog, and blessed it erstwhile) snaps now at the heels, or, bloodhound-like, merciless and cruel, flies at the throat of the master whom once he blessed. Slavery has sorrows, it is true; but equality possesses them also.

At ten o'clock Godfrey Dartworth was ready to leave.

He had not breathed his intentions to any of them, and they never questioned him.

"Shall you return here, sir, by nightfall?" asked Arthur, when he was going.

"No," was the reply. "At dusk be in waiting in the pine woods a mile below Gilder Hargreaves' estate. Bring Hercules with you, and the clothes I now wear, and which I shall leave in the hollow tree at the end of the secret path. And now good-bye, and God bless you all!"

He sprang upon the back of his horse and galloped down to the blasted pines, followed closely by "7" dressed as he had been on the night previous.

On reaching the hollow tree "7" changed his attire so that he was again Godfrey Dartworth, and after patting Hercules' sleek neck, sprang into the boat and bade "6" row him at all speed to the opposite shore.

Once there, he sprang out and passed away among the pines, leaving "6" to return with the boat, for it would be needed at night.

But Hercules was not to be left in this abrupt manner, and the moment he saw his master go he sprang into the lake and began swimming after him.

A word of command from "6," however, was sufficient to cause the sagacious animal to turn about and go back, although he did it reluctantly, for he was more than fond of his strange master.

It was high noon when Godfrey Dartworth reached the gates of Larchmere Grange, and looking down the long, dusty road, he saw Crabber Grab, the villainous lawyer, coming slowly up.

"Chance favors me!" he muttered, slipping into the shadow of a clump of trees. "I must not be seen."

All unconscious of the eyes upon him, Crabber Grab came up the road, and pushing open the gates of Larchmere Grange, passed on into the estates.

When he was out of sight Godfrey Dartworth slipped from behind the trees and has-

tended down the road in the direction of the hut in the pine woods.

Upon reaching it, he was not surprised to find the door was locked, but he was dismayed to learn that he could not enter the windows, for they were guarded upon the inside by stout iron bars, flat and as broad as a man's wrists.

Godfrey Dartworth groaned.

"To open the door is a loss of time," he muttered. "If the lawyer returns while I am at work, good-bye to every hope of learning what secret this hut contains."

But chance favored him again, for, as the reader is aware, Crabber Grab remained near Larchmere Grange until nearly nightfall.

Pulling the tools from his pocket, Dartworth pushed the edge of the chisel between the door and the joint, and with much trouble succeeded in shattering the lock, and the door flew open.

Passing quickly, he reclosed it, and made a survey of the upper part of the house.

There was not the faintest thing of interest to meet his gaze.

On the floor in one corner of the room he found a heap of blood-stained sheets, and knew instinctively they had been upon the bed where the murdered woman died.

But there was no body.

"Ah!" muttered Dartworth, "my friend Grab is a sharp one; he has doubtless disposed of Becky—hurried her into her grave while she was yet warm. But murder will out, and one day the poor devil will be avenged."

"These is nothing here of importance. I must go below. Oh, grant, Heaven, that I be not mistaken in my surmises, for on this hope hinges the future of an oppressed youth."

He left the room and ran hastily down the stairs.

On the lower landing he encountered a door.

It was locked securely.

"Perhaps the secret is hidden here," he muttered. "At all events, I must enter."

He drew back, and threw himself against the door.

It refused to yield.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SECRET REVEALED.

AGAIN and yet again he hurled himself upon it, but the trustworthy lock refused to break, and Dartworth realized that there was now no other course to pursue save that he had done with the other door, and kneeling down, he applied the chisel.

Blow after blow fell upon it, and still no success.

Would the lock never yield?

Dartworth only groaned, and worked again with the chisel and the hammer.

Ah! the lock yields!

It is no delusion; he strikes again, it breaks asunder, the door flies open, and—the room is empty!

"Lost!" he muttered. "I have wasted all this time, and it is an unused apartment."

Sick with disappointment, he leaned against the wall and gazed around.

The floor was finely sanded, yet footsteps led to the middle of the room, and then ceased—at this point the sand was spread evenly and carefully.

There was nothing about this to excite suspicion, but Godfrey Dartworth was on the alert for the most minute trifles to aid him in his search.

There was a half-burned candle in a bottle on the floor, and springing forward, he picked it up.

The presence of this assured him that the room was used for some purpose, but what?

He next turned his attention to the spot where the footprints ceased.

They came to and fro from the door to the center of the room, but beyond that point the sand was undisturbed.

"There is a trap here!" he muttered, and sinking down upon his knees, he brushed away the sand, and was not surprised to discover an iron ring embedded in the floor.

Seizing this, he lifted the trap and saw beneath a broad ladder leading down into the darkness beyond.

Darting back upstairs, he secured a match, lit the candle and went slowly down the ladder.

He felt joyful and confident of success now.

"The secret is mine!" he muttered, gladly; "in ten minutes I shall know the worst."

In ten minutes? Ah! how illy we reckon the dangers that lie before us!

The first thing that met his eye upon entering the passage, was the great door and the outer guard of twelve iron bars.

His heart sank within at the sight.

It would take four good hours to force those doors and it was now nearly two o'clock.

What if Crabber Grab should return?

As the thought came now to Dartworth, standing upon the very threshold of success, a strange, harsh pallor came over his face, and his eye flashed dangerously.

Taking his pistol from his pocket, he set down on the floor beside the candle, and knelt down in front of the twelve iron bars.

"Let him come," he muttered between his clenched teeth. "I will kill him now before I will give him up! He would have slain me—that makes the crime less black."

He did not stop to reason that one crime never can excuse another, but in his present frame of mind it suited him to believe so.

Seizing the iron bars, he endeavored to shake them.

As well strive to lift the rock of Gibraltar.

He could not strike the other door, for the space was too narrow between the bars, and, raising his voice, he shouted:

"Is there any one there?"

He fancied he heard the dull and muffled reply of a human voice and the faint rattle of a chain, but he could not have sworn to it.

Applying the file to the iron, he worked on with desperation.

Slowly the powerful little agent ate its way into the bars, but oh, so slow, and the time went speeding by so fast!

Would the bar never break?

In an hour it was eaten partially through, and applying the chisel, he cut it away and bent it back.

Another hour.

Another bar is severed and bent back, and he is able to get at the lock.

Clang! clang! rings forth the hammer, the chisel bites, enters the iron and cuts it through.

Victory! the iron bars can now be swung back, and only the stout, solid door stands between him and the secret of the vault beyond.

On and on he works.

The perspiration stands in great beads upon his brow; the powerful muscles of his arms ache in every fiber, but he never once thinks of giving up.

It seems to him now that he can hear the clank of iron beyond, the dim, indistinct murmurs of a human voice, and the thought cheers him on.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The chisel eats deeper and deeper into the iron; the door shivers and shakes with every blow, and his heart beats with great, gigantic throbs as each stroke brings him nearer to the secret beyond.

Once he paused as though he heard footsteps upon the ladder, and gripping his pistol, stood ready to do battle to the death before he relinquished his purpose.

But it was only his imagination.

With a sigh of relief he laid down the weapon and went to work again.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ah, God! it yields!

Crack! splinter, crash! and with a shriek of joy he feels the door give way and he is precipitated headlong into the vault beyond.

A shriek of gladness echoes upon the air, and scrambling to his feet he comes face to face with a wild, haggard being, chained to the opposite wall.

Dartworth staggers back with a moan.

"Good Heavens!" he cries. "He is mad!"

The prisoner is "Crazy," he scrambles to his knees, stretches forth his hands to Dartworth, and shrieks:

"Oh, for the love of Heaven do not leave me! I am not a madman!"

With a single bound Dartworth has reached his side.

"Speak—speak!" he cries. "Are you the being called 'Crazy'?"

"Yes."

A gasp of joy; a hand is laid upon "Crazy's" shoulder, and Dartworth almost shrieks:

"And your real name is—?"

The answer comes sharply; but it is just what Godfrey Dartworth expects:

"I am Howard Clinton!"

CHAPTER XIX.

REUNITED.

WHAT transpired after the events narrated in the previous chapter the reader already knows—how "7," or Godfrey Dartworth, managed to escape with poor, ill-used Howard Clinton, and beat a retreat into the great Dismal Swamp, and how quick the swift-winged messenger of war sped through the land; but we take up our story from the flight of the Swamp Angels to their home, with the rescued man with them.

Upon reaching Lake Drummond, Godfrey Dartworth urged his steed forward, and while the Swamp Angels crossed in the canoes, the noble animal, with his double burden, sprang into the water and swam directly to the blasted pines which marked the entrance to the secret path amid the treacherous death-pit and the bog.

"On—on!" he shouted, as the cries of the pursuers rang high upon the air, and the Swamp Angels echoed the shouts of those behind, only with triumph instead of rage.

Off shot the white charger, and before the Swamp Angels had reached Ghost's Circle Godfrey Dartworth and Howard Clinton were safely housed in the old hut,

In a short time, however, the remainder of the band with the revolted slaves came up.

"7" stepped to the door of the hut, flung it open, and called:

"8!"

A moment more and Arthur Clinton glided in.

He still, however, wore his wolf head.

"7" motioned him to a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "You are about to learn strange things, but you will do well to evince no surprise whatever, and wait for my signal to speak."

"8" bowed his head in token of submission, and turning to Howard Clinton, "7" said:

"Now, sir, will you oblige me with your story? I should like to learn what happened after you left Larchmere Grange to seek Crabber Grab—all before that I am well acquainted with, nor is the shadow of the Clinton family unknown to my brother here, 'No. 8.' Proceed, please."

Howard Clinton had fallen into a chair, and for some moments sat looking steadfastly at the floor, as though lost in deep thought.

He looked up at length, and glanced into the lion face of the man before him.

"I will trust you," he said, at length. "I will trust you, although I know not your purpose in wishing to know of this, nor your business here in this unholy place."

"7" folded his arms.

"Our business is to right the wrong, and to punish the oppressor," he said, coldly.

Howard Clinton shot him a grateful glance.

"And you will aid me in doing this?" he asked quickly.

"Always."

"There is no need for me to begin far back, if that is already known to you," said Howard, "therefore, I take up my story, as you request, from the day I left Larchmere Grange.

"I was mad with rage when I quitted Felecia Estmere's presence. (I cannot call her Mrs. Clinton.)"

"There is no need," said "7." "Her past is well known to me. Proceed."

"Well," continued Howard, "I felt more than certain that that newly discovered will was nothing more than a forgery, and the more this thought came to me, the more convinced I was of its truth. To this end I determined then to seek Crabber Grab and choke the truth from him, for the wretch is an arrant coward.

"My mind was inflamed as I crossed the road and went down through the pine woods to the lawyer's shanty, but for all that my senses were pretty well on the alert, and more than once I felt sure I heard some one following me.

"Thrice I paused, but I was unable to see any one even though I scrutinized the place thoroughly. I went on about a mile further, cutting deeper into the pine woods, so that Crabber Grab would not be able to see me coming, as he surely would have done had I kept in the open road; and therefore, as I meant to pounce upon him suddenly, I deemed it best to keep in the shadow of the woods, although I little dreamed what years of untold agony this step would entail me. Ah! we make missteps in life and only discover them when it is too late to rectify them!"

"Well, after I had gone on a little further, I again heard sounds in the rear, but a trifle to the north, or, in other words, upon the road proper.

"Somewhat alarmed, for I now made out the unmistakable sounds of a horse's hoofs, I halted quickly, and hid myself in the shadow of the pines.

"As I did this, I was somewhat surprised to see Digby Estmere mounted upon Meteor—my favorite horse—go dashing up the road at lightning speed, taking the direction of Crabber Grab's shanty, and I said to myself:

"Howard, my boy, you must be careful."

All this while Arthur Clinton had been listening patiently, earnestly, to the narrative, a vague suspicion of the man's identity gradually dawning upon him; but now as the man spoke his name, he knew that he was in the presence of his father, and sprang up with a glad cry.

"Fa—" he began, but "7" waved him back to his seat.

"Not yet," he said; "your suspicions are quite correct, but you must wait until Mr. Clinton finishes his narrative. Pray go on, sir."

"Well, I felt sure that he had gone to Crabber Grab to warn him of my approach, and to bid keep the secret inviolate, and deemed it best to be in ambush until he had gone, and then outbid him, even to the extent of two-thirds of the Clinton fortune, before he should triumph over me."

"To this end I remained in the woods. Now it happened that two days before, an old beggar who was wretchedly ill, had called for aid at Larchmere. I had given him food, and he left blessing me. Well, it so happened that as I came down by the pool near the road, I found this poor old fellow stretched out upon the grass, dying."

"I did all I could for him, for I happened to have a flask of brandy with me, but it was quite apparent to me, however, that all attempts to revive him were futile, for he was past aid."

"While I was administering to his wants, I heard a crackling in the undergrowth, and saw Crabber Grab coming towards me."

"I was overjoyed to meet him thus alone, for I did not dream that he had come over here on purpose to meet me, and uttering a cry of delight, I sprang and ran toward him."

"He waited until I was within half a dozen yards of him, then he wheeled suddenly, there was a flash, a report, and my right arm fell powerless by my side."

"The wretch had shot me! In this plight I could offer little resistance. He ran up, felled me by a blow from his fist, forced a gag into my mouth and bound me securely."

"The poor beggar, the moment he saw me assailed, sick and dying as he was, staggered to his feet and tottered toward Grab."

"With a single bound the villainous lawyer reached his side. I saw him grip the poor fellow's throat, force him down upon the grass, and then I heard a gurgling, rattling sound, and I knew the beggar had been strangled."

"Stripping off his clothes, Grab seized a fragment of rock, battered the poor wretch's face until his features were unrecognizable, and then threw him into the pond."

"He loosened my shoes, flung them down in the bushes, and with the beggar's rags and myself in his arms, went back to the shanty in the pines."

"Just what I suffered in the cell which they prepared for me, and where you found me to-night, no tongue can tell."

"Fancying they would watch me less guardedly, I feigned madness, and thus acquired the sobriquet of 'Crazy'."

"Grab subsequently admitted to me that the will was not only a forged one, but that Mrs. Estmere had poisoned my father."

"He did visit him that day. He discovered that his wife was trying to murder him, and went to alter his will. Felecia Estmere offered a high sum, and Crabber Grab waylaid him, injured him so that he could not speak, secured his foot in the stirrup, and drove the horse home to Larchmere Grange!"

"7" moved uneasily.

He went forward and laid his hand on Howard Clinton's arm.

"Did Crabber Grab admit all this to you?" he said, and his voice trembled strangely while he spoke.

"Yes," replied Howard, "and what is more, showed me the receipts for so doing signed by Mrs. Estmere's own hand. Ah, he was a wily

dog, and did nothing without clinching it so that he might have a continuous hold."

"Has he those papers still about him?"

"He had up to a week ago."

"7" breathed a sigh of relief.

"Justice is ours at last!" he said. "Heaven has been good to us. Now you shall go back to Larchmere Grange and to your son, on condition that you free all your slaves. The papers shall be taken from the lawyer and your rights proven."

"You promise me that?"

"I swear it!" responded "7," solemnly.

Howard Clinton sprung up and wrung his hand.

"God bless you!" he said, fervently. "All shall be as you desire. My slaves were never ill-used under me, but they shall all be free, I promise you that. Yet," (and his voice quivered strangely, while a tear glittered upon the dark fringe of his eyelid), "I can never reclaim my son; he is lost to me."

"How? Why?" demanded "7," quickly.

"Crabber Grab told me all," responded Howard, sadly. "He has linked his fortunes with the Estmeres and gone to their side."

"Crabber Grab lied!" thundered "7."

"Lied?"

"Yes, lied! He is with the right, armed to lift the wronged and to battle against the oppressor. Behold him there—the Swamp Angel 'No. 8,' your son, Arthur Clinton."

Arthur sprang to his feet and tossed off the wolf head and leaped forward.

"Father!"

"My boy!"

Then the strong, manly arms were thrown about Howard Clinton's neck, and despite all the plots and plans to sever them eternally father and son were clasped in a tight and loving embrace.

As for "7," he turned away and bade the men be ready to go out again this night, but now to Larchmere Grange, while "4" and "5" were sent to seek Crabber Grab.

"The mystery shall be a mystery no more," he said. "To-night shall end our story."

CHAPTER XX.

THE RISEN DEAD.

MIDNIGHT!

Clang! Pealed forth from the great bell at Larchmere Grange, and Mrs. Clinton, awakened from her slumbers, sprang bolt upright in bed.

"Good Heavens!" she gasped. "What can that mean? My God! if Crabber Grab has betrayed me! What if he has turned state's evidence, and saved his own neck at the risk of mine. Oh, I must know the worst at once!"

Clang! Clang! Clang—g—g!

Thrice it echoed above the silence of the night, then loud outcries arose on every side, followed by the hasty patter of footsteps on the stairs.

Somebody dashed quickly across the hall, and struck the panels of her door with a clenched fist.

"Who's there?" she gasped. "Speak! who are you?"

"Hist! Open the door quickly, mother. 'Tis I!"

She sprang forward with a moan and unlocked the door.

She knew now something terrible had happened.

Digby Estmere, white as death, tottered across the threshold.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Gather up what valuables you can. The house is surrounded."

"Good God! then we are lost."

"Ay, lost indeed, unless we can escape. Crabber Grab is with them. The Swamp Angels have captured him."

Mrs. Clinton staggered back with a shriek.

"Save me! save me, Digby!" she cried. "I am lost now. He possesses the papers which prove me a murderer and you the offspring of an illegal marriage."

He sprang forward and clutched her arm.

"Woman, is this true? Was not your marriage with Estmere legal?"

"Yes and no! I had another husband, Harold Devereaux. Oh, for God's sake, let us fly while it is not yet too late!"

She gathered up her jewels, seized a purse of money, and followed him quickly out upon the landing.

At that moment there was a frightful crash below—the front door had been burst in, and the Swamp Angels darted up the stairs.

Digby Estmere muttered an oath, but his mother caught him by the arm.

"Come, come!" she gasped. "The private staircase in the left wing."

They ran quickly forward, and had begun to descend the stairs when the door was burst open and hordes of screaming slaves, followed by the Swamp Angels with torches in their hands flocked after them.

"There they are—there they are!" rang forth upon the air as the widow and her villainous son were seen descending the stairs.

Mrs. Clinton turned with a shriek, and dashed back to her own room.

At that moment the men from the front burst in upon them, and before she could lock the door, Digby and herself were surrounded.

She leaned back against the wall, white and panting.

"Cowards!" she gasped, "would you slay a woman?"

"No; we leave the law to do that."

The voice rang from the crowd, and looking up, she saw Howard Clinton come forward and confront her.

A wild, agonizing shriek rang forth upon the air, as the widow slunk behind her son, and gasped:

"You—you! I thought you dead!"

"And so the world thought, madame," he replied. "But by your villainous arts I was deprived of my liberty. Crabber Grab has been made to speak the truth. The will found by him was a forgery. More than that, you poisoned my father, and from papers found upon Crabber Grab it is proven past a doubt that you also killed your first husband!"

"It's a lie! a vile, infamous lie!" shrieked Felecia. "The lawyer lies, and the papers upon his person are forgeries."

"7" of the Dismal Swamp stepped forward and confronted her.

"They are not forgeries, Felecia Devereaux!" he cried, his voice sounding hollow and strained beneath his lion mask. "They are truths."

Felecia retreated before the man-lion, and Howard Clinton spoke.

"Digby Estmere," he said, "these men have marked you for their prey, and to-night your grave will be in the slime of the great Dismal Swamp. As for your mother, the law claims her as a murderer, but for the love my poor father once bore her, I will give her a weapon by which she may end her own life."

"No!" it was "7" that spoke. "Her life is mine," he said, and then he drew the lion head from his shoulders.

A shriek, horrible and heart-rending rang forth from Felecia's lips, coupled with the words:

"The grave gives up its dead. My God! you are Harold Devereaux."

"Yes, I am Harold Devereaux—true to you in death as I have ever been in life. I loved you in the past, I love you still, and no one shall separate us now!"

Then, without a word of warning, he caught her in his arms, leaped upon the window ledge, and with a shriek of triumph, sprang out into the space.

They heard their bodies brush against the ivy in their descent then there came a dull, heavy thud; and all was silent.

When they reached the ground, they found the two twined in each others arms, crushed, mangled, dead!"

That night Digby Estmere and Crabber Grab were hurried into the heart of the great Dismal Swamp by the remainder of "7's" men, but they were never seen in this world again.

What became of Estmere's wife and child was uncertain. They disappeared that night and have never since been seen. Probably the Swamp Angels could have thrown some light upon the affair, but they never spoke, and soon after, disbanded.

* * * * *

Howard Clinton and his brave son gained their inheritance, but the promise given in the great Dismal Swamp was well kept, for the slaves were freed to a man.

But they were destined to have a universal freedom, as the whole world knows, and thus was the prophecy of "7" fulfilled, for in the great encounter the North was victorious, and the fetters fell from the wrists of the bondmen.

* * * * *

To-day Larchmere Grange rings with fresh young voices—the children of Arthur Clinton—for the shadow has been removed, but not forgotten; nor is the memory of Harold Devereaux allowed to fade, for in the heart of the little cemetery there it stands a single shaft of marble, clustered around with flowers trained by careful hands, and on this column is engraved simply:

"7"
of
DISMAL SWAMP.

[THE END.]

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